



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Liaison Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Prime Minister, HC 848

Tuesday 8 April 2025

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Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); Debbie Abrahams; Tonia Antoniazzi; Ruth Cadbury; Sarah Champion; Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown; Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi; Florence Eshalomi; Bill Esterson; Patricia Ferguson; Layla Moran; Chi Onwurah; Sarah Owen.

Questions 1-74

Witness

I: Rt Hon Sir Keir Starmer MP, Prime Minister.



Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon Sir Keir Starmer MP, Prime Minister.

Chair: Welcome to the Liaison Committee on Tuesday 8 April 2025. We are delighted to welcome the Prime Minister for his second outing in front of the Liaison Committee in this Session of Parliament. Welcome, Prime Minister, and thank you for your time today.

The Prime Minister: Not at all.

Q1 **Chair:** Prime Minister, I want to kick off with the big issue of the last few days. Growth is obviously your Government's primary objective, but in the light of what happened last week, with the introduction of tariffs by the United States and predictions of a global recession, are you looking at revisiting your economic plans as a Government?

The Prime Minister: What has happened in the last few days—the last week or so—is obviously very challenging for us and very challenging around the world. I am obviously very disappointed to see tariffs in place; I do not think that they are good for our economy or for economies around the world. My instinct is that we should not jump in with both feet to retaliate, so in that sense I am not changing my plans. I think we need a calm, collected response. Obviously, we have to keep our options on the table and do the preparatory work for retaliation if necessary, but I think that trying to negotiate an arrangement that mitigates the tariffs is better.

More fundamentally in answer to your question, I do not think that what has happened in the last few days is a temporary, passing phase. I think it is a changing world order. I think the world is changing before us—there is a new era—and therefore I think there are two ways in which our plans do not so much change as turbocharge.

The first is that we have to do much more, and go further and faster, in making sure our economy is resilient and thriving. I gave some examples of that yesterday—you will have seen them, so I will not repeat them here—in relation to ZEV mandates and life sciences. They are a down payment; they are an example of what I think we need to do here to go further and faster in the changes to our economy.

Secondly, we have to talk to like-minded countries about lowering the barriers to trade between us. That is why I spent a good deal of the weekend on the phone to international leaders, partly gauging their response, exchanging notes and understanding how they were approaching the challenge, but also having a broader discussion about how they are likely to respond.

The priority of growth does not change, and the fundamentals do not change, but in two respects we need to go further and faster. Yes, turbocharging the changes we need in our economy needs to go further and faster; I am absolutely clear about that. Secondly, lowering barriers to trade with other countries needs to go further and faster, in my view.



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Q2 **Chair:** In response to the banking crisis and covid, the state threw a lot at different parts of the system to try to make sure that the issues around potential recession and so on were mitigated. Are you planning to do anything like that? Are you looking at the fiscal rules at all?

The Prime Minister: Some of the support that we have put in is more in the nature of breaking down the barriers that are in the way, and I think the state can and should do much more of that. For example, yesterday, on the ZEV mandate, it was introducing a degree of flexibility rather than putting money behind something. Other examples would be what we are doing on planning and infrastructure, where, again, it is not so much putting money in; it is changing the way the state operates, if you like.

Q3 **Chair:** We know about those, but is there anything that you are looking at, other than what you have already put in place or are planning to put in place as a result of last week?

The Prime Minister: Oh, yes. There is a whole host of things. I am starting with the sectors that are most obviously impacted, because we have the 10% reciprocal tariff, but for cars it is up at 25%—I was at JLR yesterday, and you see the impact there—and for steel there is obviously concern. It is already challenging with Scunthorpe and Port Talbot—the Committee will know all of those issues. We are yet to see what the situation will be in life sciences. I have started with the three sectors likely to be most impacted, but I am absolutely clear in my own mind that what we are doing in terms of going further and faster needs to be across the board. That was always my view: it needs to go further and faster now.

Q4 **Bill Esterson:** Thank you for joining us, Prime Minister. I was pleased, because I have people who work at JLR, albeit in Halewood—you were at JLR in Solihull—by the support you gave to the car industry yesterday, but I want to talk to you about steel.

The situation at Scunthorpe, which I know you visited, is obviously very urgent. One of the asks that seems to be coming out is for the Government to provide support—maybe this fits in with what you have just described as changing how the state operates—by buying raw materials to keep production going. Is that one of the things that might still be on the table, or are alternatives being looked at? Clearly it is a very serious situation, and I know you are committed to steel.

The Prime Minister: Thank you for raising Scunthorpe. We are in the middle of discussions, so I hope the Committee will forgive me if I do not go through the fine detail, but I am absolutely committed to steel production in this country. All our plans are going to require infrastructure and more steel in this country, so the last thing we want to do is lose our capacity on steel. That is why we set aside quite a chunk of money—£2.5 billion—on top of the money we have put into Port Talbot, which got a better deal there, for Scunthorpe.

I have spent some time at Scunthorpe talking to the management and the workforce, and I know at first hand the impact that any loss of capacity at Scunthorpe would have on the workforce, the community and the country.



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Therefore, we will keep talking. We have made an offer, but all options are on the table in relation to Scunthorpe. I think it is really important, and we are in the middle of those discussions at the moment.

Q5 **Bill Esterson:** We are keen to learn what “all options are on the table” means in more detail, if there is anything you can say, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: I do not want to be unhelpful to the Committee, but as you can imagine, these are ongoing discussions. I can reassure the Committee that we are doing everything we can to ensure that there is a bright future for Scunthorpe. As to precisely where we have got to in those talks, I will very happily provide you with further details as soon as I can. There is no problem with that; it is just that there is a limit to what I can say right here at the moment. I hope that that is understandable.

Q6 **Bill Esterson:** Thank you for that. I was at Port Talbot with the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee two weeks ago, and people were saying to me how frustrating and worrying it is that the blast furnaces shut there some years before the new electric arc furnaces will be opened. They are very encouraged and pleased by the Government’s support for the new technology, but that gap is a reminder of previous deindustrialisation. How do you make sure that those fears are allayed, whether it is in south Wales, Scunthorpe or anywhere else?

The Prime Minister: Oh, we have absolutely got to grip this. What you touch on is hugely important. It is the same story in Scunthorpe; I talked it through with the team there. To go from the blast furnace to the electric arc furnace is a step they want to take, as they are doing at Port Talbot. When I was at Scunthorpe—it may have changed a little bit since then—they said that they could get the new electric arc furnace up and running by about 2027 or 2028, but they had got a connection point from the grid of 2034. That is what set me off on the work that we need to reform the way the grid operates.

This is all part and parcel of going further and faster, because you cannot have a situation where there is such a big gap between finishing one capability and going on to the next capability. It is not tolerable to have a gap that is caused, in that particular case, by the slowness of the grid in being able to connect up to the arc furnace. That was the problem in Scunthorpe. It is a slightly different version in Port Talbot, but these are some of the barriers that have to be knocked out of the way. We cannot operate in an environment that goes so slowly.

Q7 **Bill Esterson:** Absolutely, Prime Minister, and my Committee has heard detailed evidence to make the points that you make extremely well. The timeframes you have set out, though, are several years away. In some cases, they are considerably beyond the date of the next general election. How are you going to make sure that people are better off at the end of the Parliament than they were at the beginning?

The Prime Minister: In terms of net zero and steel, or more generally?

Bill Esterson: Both, but there is this real concern with the growth figures.



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The Prime Minister: More generally, there are things that we have been able to do at speed. For example, we have had the highest levels of investment into the country for 20 years in the last nine months. We have been able to adjust the living wage—just last week—by £1,400, so that the lowest-paid in our society got a pay rise. We have been able to ensure that interest rates have come down now three times for those on mortgages—that is a huge issue—and we have created 190,000 jobs. There are things that are already happening, along with things like the waiting lists coming down for the NHS. Of course that is a health issue on the one hand, but it is also an issue of the economy, because people can be faster back into work.

There are things that we can do more immediately; other things take longer, but I do not accept that things like the grid just have to wait. Without going into all the things on the grid, one of them is to get rid of the old queuing system, so that we can prioritise—your Committee will be across this—and reduce those times straightaway. We cannot have infrastructure projects taking forever in this country, which is what they have been doing for a very long time. That is where we need to be bolder, go further, go faster and just get those barriers out of the way.

Q8 Ruth Cadbury: Prime Minister, given that the US President has imposed a 25% tariff on car imports, yesterday's announcements from you and the Transport Secretary to support the roll-out of EVs were obviously welcomed by UK vehicle manufacturers. But drivers really need more incentive to switch to EVs, particularly those who do not have the ability to charge their vehicle at home. In the UK we have, geographically, very weak infrastructure and very poor levels of charging points outside London and the south-east, and there is a price differential for charging: if you cannot charge off your domestic supply, you are paying 20% VAT, not 5%, and you are paying for the operator charges. It is not that easy to incentivise people to change. Are you and the Government looking at this, and do you have any specific thoughts?

The Prime Minister: Thank you for raising that; it is a really important point. There are a number of things that need to be done, but there are two things that I think impact people most in their decision whether to swap to an electric vehicle.

The first thing is the crossover price—the point at which it is as cheap to buy an electric vehicle as it is to buy a diesel or petrol vehicle. That will be a very significant date; I keep bearing down on that date, which is the late '20s at the moment, but it will be very significant because that is the up-front cost of buying in the first place.

The second thing is an anxiety about charging points. That is why we have put more money behind the infrastructure for charging points, to a point where there ought to be one being built every half an hour from here on in. That was among the announcements I made yesterday. It was not a new announcement, to be fair: most of what I said yesterday was new in terms of the flexibility, but this was a reassertion of our commitment on charging points.



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I also want to tilt the question. If there is any missing of carbon targets by those who build cars, I want to ensure that any of the money that then becomes available is paid into a fund that deals with things like infrastructure in this country, because you are absolutely right that that is where the pinch point is. That is what people are worried about: “Can I afford it in the first place—what is the crossover price?” and “Am I going to be able to get from A to B and charge it appropriately and cheaply along the way?” Those are the two things that, for me, would make a material difference.

Q9 **Ruth Cadbury:** I hope you will look at the geographic point as well.

The Prime Minister: Absolutely, yes.

Q10 **Ruth Cadbury:** If you live in a block of flats and you cannot charge from your home supply, you cannot even charge at all, let alone have an issue about range anxiety.

The Prime Minister: There is also the technology. I think the new Range Rover now does 500 miles on its battery, which is way beyond what it could have done a few years ago. We will get into that space, but you are absolutely right.

Q11 **Ruth Cadbury:** I will move on to rail. Your announcements on the weekend on rail schemes, particularly around the trans-Pennine route upgrade, were very welcome for those areas. But it was only £415 million and all the elements had previously been announced. Are the Government being more ambitious, particularly in looking at significant rail infrastructure in the north—a repurposed HS2 route north of Birmingham, and the Northern Powerhouse Rail link across the Pennines?

The Prime Minister: First, the £415 million was additional money. It was not the only money; it was additional to the money that has already been committed, which is in the several billions of pounds. The whole project, if memory serves, is about £10 billion. It was more money towards that, and that is why it was welcome.

In relation to the broader point that you make, yes, we do want to ensure that we get better transport infrastructure. My view is that the best way to ensure that we get what we need is to work with locally elected representatives, particularly the mayors, on what they say is the priority for them. That is why we are working with the mayors of Manchester, Liverpool, West Yorkshire and so on to devise the plan with them. As for the idea of somebody sitting in Westminster or Whitehall and deciding what the best transport infrastructure is for Yorkshire, across east to west, to Manchester and Liverpool or across to Bradford, Leeds and Hull—that should be determined with locally elected leaders. That has to be a joint plan, if you like, and that is the way we are approaching it.

Q12 **Ruth Cadbury:** Competitor countries have more innovative ways of funding rail infrastructure, particularly working with the private sector. The Railway Industry Association has just done a report encouraging the Government to look at land value capture, energy generation, using



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station property to develop housing and so on, as a way of bringing in additional funding to develop much-needed rail infrastructure. Will the Government be looking at those?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do want to look at projects like that. Thank you for raising that. If you look at our ambition to build 1.5 million homes and ask yourself, "Where would you start with those homes?" it would be in and around railway stations and the like, where there is quite a lot of land that is of quite reasonable value. I think we can therefore bring the two together. We are actively exploring what more we can do there, for the very reasons that you set out.

Q13 **Patricia Ferguson:** Prime Minister, Scotland's space sector is leading the way through the development of a spaceport at SaxaVord in Shetland. How confident are you that the Government fully grasp the economic potential of the space launch sector in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: I think it has huge potential. Whether it is space or whether it is Grangemouth, which obviously has its challenges but has fantastic potential as far as I am concerned, there are a number of places in Scotland where we should build our strategy for growth, and that would be one of them.

Q14 **Patricia Ferguson:** SaxaVord itself is facing very strong competition from Norway: Andøya had a successful test launch last month. I wonder what the Government could do to maintain Scotland's competitive edge and ensure that we consolidate that position. One thing that the industry has suggested is that we should have a stand-alone Minister for space to help it to negotiate all the various jurisdictions and authorities that it has to work with. Is that something that you would consider?

The Prime Minister: That has not been put to me yet, but it now has. Like all good points, I will take it away and think about it. My instinct is not always to create a new post, because I am not sure that that is always what delivers, but on the other hand there is real potential there, as you rightly say, and there is probably more that we could and should do, working with the Scotland Office, which has actually just published its plan for growth in Scotland. Let me take it away, but I do not want to raise expectations, because I am not a particular fan of just creating more and more posts.

Chair: You are not allowed to just create more and more posts anyway.

The Prime Minister: Well, there is that as well, but I do not want to miss the point, because it is a really important point about where in Scotland the really important growth potentials are. I think that that is one of them; there are plenty of others as well, particularly in renewables.

Q15 **Patricia Ferguson:** A European launch capability in Scotland could be vital to the UK and Europe's future defence and security. Given the rapidly evolving global security picture, what are the Government doing to ensure that the commercial development of Scotland's space sector is aligned with the UK's defence and national security objectives?



The Prime Minister: All of this has to be aligned. One of the important changes that we need to look at as we go through our strategic review is how we bind our defence and security sector more closely to the private sector, and how we make sure that, whether it is space or any other capability, defence is part of our story on economic growth.

There has been a tendency until now to see defence and security in a silo of its own, ringfenced from the other challenges on growth, when in fact it could and should be a really powerful driver of growth. We need to bring the two more closely together, and that is what we will do. Our strategic review will be published in due course.

I am absolutely clear in my mind that we need a better economic story around our defence spend, which will go up because of the percentage increase that we have put in. Of course, across Europe, other countries are increasing their spend, which increases the potential for our capacity in the United Kingdom. Scotland has a very interesting and important story to tell on this, whether it is shipbuilding or submarines and so on. This is a big part of Scotland's history, heritage and future.

Q16 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I hope you will not mind me following up on a question on AI that I asked you at the last meeting of this Committee.

You have been very clear that AI and digital co-ordination have the potential to significantly boost productivity in the civil service and across the public sector. This will partly involve more money to replace the large number of legacy IT systems and procure new ones. However, the biggest change would be to transform the way the civil service works. A theme that has emerged across the Public Accounts Committee's really diverse range of hearings would be to embed digital and cyber information officers at senior management levels and on the senior boards in every Department of the civil service. Is that something you might consider?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I think it is really vital. We want to double the number of civil servants working in data and digital roles by 2030—so, increase the volume. There will be incentives for that. We have 2,000 TechTrack apprentices in place for that very reason. This can be transformative, not just to the services that are externally delivered but, as you say, to the heart of Government in relation to some of the tasks that are being done. I am certainly pushing this forward from the centre. I think this sort of transformation only really happens if No.10 is absolutely full square behind it.

I am personally pushing this all the time, because I think this will be transformative of what we can do and how we can do it, and it releases individuals to be more human. The AI does the bits like the collation of information. For example, on planning, we think we can use AI to collate a lot of the available information and put it into the right format, so the decision maker can use their professional judgment and spend more time on that than on the task of collating the information. The same goes for probation officers, who obviously have to record all their decisions and



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exchanges—collate that using AI and then let the professional use their time to make the professional judgments. I think this is going to be a game changer if we can get it right. We need to push it through.

Q17 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** To follow that up, in our enthusiasm for AI, we have to make sure that it is ethically acceptable too.

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Q18 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** We had a hearing with the DWP where two bits of AI had to be dropped because they were deemed to be discriminatory against certain claimants. Can we bear that in mind as well?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely. There are huge opportunities and risks, and we need to marry the two. In the end I think your stance matters: are you forward-leaning and seeing the opportunity, or are you leaning back, seeing the risk and not wanting to move? I am in the first camp, but I absolutely accept that that has got to be within a framework that means AI can be used for good purpose and safely. I believe it can, but we need to bear that in mind all the time.

Q19 **Chair:** Prime Minister, earlier you talked about breaking down the barriers, and one of the things that you have driven is the desire to reduce regulation. How much do you think you are going to get tangibly, in terms of economic growth, by reducing the number of regulators we have? How are you going to balance that with consumer interests, safety and other important aspects?

The Prime Minister: There is a large chunk of growth we can get by stripping away regulation. You will be astonished at how many regulators and regulatory bodies we have put in place over the years.

Chair: Yes, I spend a lot of time looking at them.

The Prime Minister: Yes, and my own sense is—

Q20 **Chair:** What are the tangible benefits? You are stripping them away, but then there is a risk to consumers, isn't there? Can you give us an example of where you will see actual growth as a result of reducing regulation?

The Prime Minister: Oh, just speed of decision making. As soon as you have a regulator in place, you can bet your bottom dollar that there has got to be a consultation with X, Y and Z before a decision can be made. That then takes forever, there is a deadline that is breached and nobody wants to do anything about it because you might come up against the regulator, and the priorities of the regulator are not necessarily aligned with what the Government is trying to achieve—so there is a huge amount of work to do there.

I am not saying there should never be any checks and balances—of course I am not—but what I think has happened over the years, which is perhaps understandable, is that every time anything has gone wrong in Government, the instinct of successive Governments has been, "Let's put an arm's length body, a regulator, a check and balance, a consultation in



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place” to a point where now all of us, myself included, are pretty frustrated that when we want to get something done, it takes far too long. Planning would be the classic example of that, which is why we are putting through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. In answer to your question on growth, that is the single biggest non-fiscal matter that has ever been scored by the OBR, so they are very clear about the growth potential of getting rid of that element of regulation.

Q21 Chair: Your mission boards will be looking at this. Will you pledge to publish the minutes of those mission boards so that we can watch what you are doing in this area and the other areas we are discussing today?

The Prime Minister: Let me go away and have a think about that, because I do not want to make a commitment that I cannot keep. That is a place, in confidence, where I push my teams hard on what they are doing. It is where ideas come to the table. I will take away the challenge that you are putting to me, which is, “How can we make this more transparent?” but I do not want to say yes to the Committee and make a commitment—

Q22 Chair: But in the drive for growth, are you mindful of consumers and the protections that regulators bring? Take the state of our waterways, for instance: without regulation, goodness knows what they would be like.

The Prime Minister: Yeah, but I do not think regulation is the only issue for our waterways. Let me go away and think about how we can respond appropriately to the challenge you are putting to me about transparency, but what I do not want to do is make a commitment here that, in the end, does not work very well.

Chair: Okay. Thank you for your thoughts on regulation.

Q23 Debbie Abrahams: My questions will be on the “Pathways to Work” Green Paper. I think most people accept the need to reform our social security system, and the need to transform our labour market to enable disabled people to flourish within it, but based on the evidence of similar disability benefit cuts—for example, the 2017 cut to the work-related activity component of employment and support allowance—we saw that, unfortunately, there was not the delivery of increased jobs for sick and disabled people. In fact, we saw an increase in mental health issues and 28,000 sick and disabled people pushed into severe poverty. How are we going to ensure that the reforms proposed in the Green Paper will not push more sick and disabled people into poverty, and further away from the labour market?

The Prime Minister: First, as you rightly point out, we need to learn the lessons of the past, where proposals were put in place that, in the end, did not achieve the desired end. I do not think that means that nothing can ever work; I do not accept that for a minute. I am very struck by the additional number of people who are now not in work.

I genuinely think that the measures we put in place—the right to try work, for example—could make a huge difference. I have seen many examples,



as you will have, of people who would like to take the step into work, but are worried that if they do and they fail, they will not get the work and will not have the benefit at the end of the exercise. I have seen pilots, which I have gone to look at myself, where some firms have voluntarily said, "We'll do a right to try scheme." To my mind, and from the evidence I saw in front of me, they worked pretty well—although not in every case, I admit. We need to go through each of the measures with that approach, checking it against delivery, but I am convinced that some of them can make a material difference, including the right to try work and the support that we are going to put to people who want to get into work.

Q24 Debbie Abrahams: On top of the issue around lack of deliverability on employment outcomes, again in international-level evidence, and from our own experience here over the last 10 years, we have also seen that fiscal savings were not made. Given that the OBR has refused to score the supply-side effects of the Green Paper, that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation analysis indicates that not 250,000 people, as the Government estimates, but 400,000 will be pushed into poverty, and that children in family poverty and adversity are five times more likely to end up as NEETs as young people, what needs to happen to ensure that the Green Paper addresses the root causes of this poverty and adversity rather than adds to them?

The Prime Minister: Thank you for raising that. On the impact assessments, it is significant, to my mind, that the ability of any policy or legislation to change any behaviour at all is not priced in. In other words, the OBR has scored nothing against any change here: the assumption is that not a single person changes their behaviour. I personally struggle with that way of looking at it, because I do think these measures will make a material difference, and they need to make a material difference.

You talk about NEETs. I am very worried about the one in eight young people who are currently not earning or learning, because there is a pattern here of young people who are caught, in my view, in the sort of covid years and who have then gone straight into—

Q25 Debbie Abrahams: Can I stop you there? I do apologise. I did mention NEETs, and there is new evidence that shows that it is child poverty and family adversity that are the key drivers of this. Covid does play a part, particularly for countries, like ours and like the US, that had a particularly bad experience of covid, but this is peer-reviewed evidence showing that poverty and family adversity are the key drivers. How are we going to make sure that we do not make that worse by pushing more families into poverty?

Your point on the impact assessment is very well made, Prime Minister. I do not know if you are aware of what impact assessments are in the pipeline. Clearly, there are real issues with what was analysed in terms of the poverty impact assessment, and we had no employment impact assessment. Will you now commission independent analyses to ensure that we have robust evidence, so that the policies that we are trying to implement, for all the right reasons, have the effects that we want?



The Prime Minister: We have to have the right evidence base, and that is crucially important. We also have to do the work that we are committed to on child poverty and the child poverty strategy, which is proceeding. One of the achievements of the last Labour Government was to reduce child poverty, and I want this Labour Government to reduce child poverty as well. That is why the strategy on child poverty is so important to us. As soon as we are able to share more details of that with you, we obviously will do so, so that we can take your views on it into account.

Q26 **Debbie Abrahams:** I have a final little question, Chair, if that is okay. On that basis, Prime Minister—I absolutely agree with you that we need to do that work—will you commit to not implementing legislation before we have the details of those impact assessments? I think that is so important; otherwise, we will potentially have policy that will not work and that could actually do harm.

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we need an evidence base, but we also need to get on with the work that we need to get on to, so I am not going to make commitments in relation to timetabling, but I absolutely take the point you put to me.

Q27 **Chair:** Do you have an idea of the timetable for those announcements on child poverty?

The Prime Minister: Yes, but not to the date. Can I write back to you on that? We are working on it, and I will be able to give you better information.

Chair: Please, if you could. We appreciate that the spending review is in June, but some decisions are clearly being made before then, so it would be helpful to know.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I will write to the Committee with more details of that.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Q28 **Sarah Owen:** Prime Minister, I noted your response to Ms Abrahams' first question: that you want more disabled people to be able to work. I think that that is something that we all would like to see—that employers actually make the reasonable adjustments for people to access work. However, there is a group of people who the Government's own assessment shows are the most severely disabled—these are people with limited capability for work-related activity—and people in that group in the future will be £3,000 worse off. This is not a small group of people; this is potentially 730,000 people.

I want to ask you about how people are feeling. We do not often talk about this in politics, but it is important. It is fair to say that your proposed changes to welfare reform have caused quite a bit of stress, particularly among people with disabilities and their families. I am sure many Members have heard similar things, but let me give some samples of what has come into my inbox: "I am beyond stressed with anticipation of losing money. I have £700 to live on this month." Another person said:



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"The proposed cuts to disability benefits have left me feeling full of panic about the future and extremely let down." The last example is: "I feel so sick. Physically sick. The whole process is horrid. Please represent me." Prime Minister, what would you say to those people?

The Prime Minister: I think the question of how people feel and values is really important, which is why—to stand back from the technicalities of any changes—the guiding principles are really important. Those people who need support and protection should get it. Those who want to bridge into work should be supported by the Government to do so. At the moment, my own analysis is that pretty well all the rules make it harder, not easier, for people to get into work. Equally, those who can work should work. We need to apply those principles to the work we are doing as we go along.

Q29 **Sarah Owen:** Prime Minister, my question was specifically about the people who are very unlikely ever to be able to work—the most severely disabled, who will, in future, be £3,000 worse off. How are you working with the disabilities charities and organisations, none of which I can see have welcomed the plans? We are going through a consultation period; is that consultation on the policy itself or its impact? The two things are very different. Will the consultation period actually alter, or be able to change, or perhaps bring people together on this, in a way that we have not so far?

The Prime Minister: I do want to bring people together on this, and it is very important that we take different views into account. It is also important that people who have disabilities that mean they can never work are not constantly reassessed. That is something I have picked up as a constant cause of anxiety. That is why I personally think we should be doing more protection, with a premium for those in the most severe category who are never going to be able to work, and also relieve them of the pressure of being reassessed when we know that the reassessment is not going to make any material difference. I do think there are things we can do that will reform the system for the better. We certainly need to take views into account in relation to that.

Q30 **Sarah Owen:** We all agree that we want to see more people in work, but why have the Government looked at disabled people first? One of my Committee's inquiries was about medical misogyny. People missing work due to heavy periods, painful periods, endometriosis, fibroids and ovarian cysts costs the UK economy nearly £11 billion every year. Would it perhaps not be more effective, or just as effective, to deal with the crisis in women's health? What is the Government's plan to tackle that?

The Prime Minister: There is a lot of work going into women's health across the Government, and it is very important that we do that as well. We are bringing forward bits of guidance and legislation. It is very important that we bear down on that, for all the reasons you have mentioned.

Q31 **Sarah Owen:** Prime Minister, it can take an average of eight to 10 years for a woman to be diagnosed—only diagnosed—with endometriosis, which



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is one of the most painful, debilitating illnesses for women in terms of reproductive health. That is eight to 10 years in which a woman is potentially out of the workplace, which is why we are seeing the £11 billion cost to the economy. If we are looking at effective ways to get people into work, perhaps we should explore other areas as well.

The Prime Minister: I completely agree with that. That sort of timeframe is just completely unacceptable. We have tasked the Health Secretary with reforming the NHS and, in particular, dealing with health inequalities as he does so. That is an example that is simply unacceptable—it is not capable of justification—and the health service needs to be better set up to deal with it, and it could and should be. That is not just about pumping more money in—there are other things we can do in the health service—but that will be part of the work that the Health Secretary has already been charged with doing, because the example you give is a very bad example, and I am not going to sit here and pretend that that can be justified, because it cannot.

Sarah Owen: Thank you, Prime Minister.

Q32 **Chair:** Prime Minister, you were talking about language being important. Do you think the language that the Cabinet uses is important and that it is important not to demonise people? Your Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Chancellor both talked about pocket money in relation to benefits. Are you clamping down on that sort of language?

The Prime Minister: Of course language matters. I think that every member of the Cabinet knows that. Occasionally, people do not get it quite right. They usually apologise, and quite right too. But I completely take your point that language matters.

The two values that have driven me in everything I have done as a lawyer and as a politician are dignity and respect. “Dignity” is probably the most important word in my dictionary. The dignity of the individual and respect for individuals are the two things that I go to first when it comes to value. To be fair, that is the same for the Cabinet, but you are right: there is always the need to remind people about the language they use.

Q33 **Layla Moran:** Following on from the question of Ms Owen and in particular thinking about those with disabilities, we had a roundtable of the Health and Social Care Committee in this very room and, almost where I am sat, was a woman who described her experience of NHS and care. To paraphrase her, she said, “The NHS keeps me alive, but social care is what helps me to thrive.” Prime Minister, how do you see the role of social care in our community and our economy?

The Prime Minister: It is hugely important in its own right and working alongside the NHS. Like most people, I have long thought we ought to reform it, which is why we have asked Louise Casey to carry out that reform programme and to do it on a cross-party basis. She starts her work this month. I have expressly asked her to reach out straightaway on a cross-party basis, because we need to reform social care, and we need to make sure that if we do reform it, it is lasting reform. I do not think that



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that is possible unless it is a cross-party consensus about how we go forward with social care. It is hugely important, as I say, in its own right and to complement what we do with the NHS. It is very hard to get the NHS back working as we want, if we do not also sort out social care.

Q34 **Layla Moran:** Very true. Do you see social care as mainly a drain on the Treasury or as an enabler to the economy?

The Prime Minister: An enabler to the economy. My sister is a care worker, by the way, so I know this at first hand. I mean, it is absolutely about ensuring that people can live to their full potential for as long as possible in their lives, and have fulfilled lives.

Q35 **Layla Moran:** I am pleased to hear you say that, but do you share my frustration—which much of the sector feels as well—about three years? That then butts up any decision close to an election, and when social care reforms have been kiboshed in the past, it has been during election campaigns. Surely the way to solve this would be to get it done and dusted during this Parliament, not kick it into the long grass so that it can then be kiboshed at the next election.

The Prime Minister: First of all, I understand your frustration that this has been pushed down the road too many times. The way I see it is this: first, we need to take time to get it right and it needs to be cross-party—Louise Casey is, in my view, the right person on a project like this, and I have huge experience working with Louise Casey. But that should not stop us doing things straightaway, to answer your question. That is why we made available £3.7 billion of additional funding for social care authorities in '25-26. That is really important as a first step.

Obviously, we also took steps in relation to carer's allowance weekly earnings limit. A fair pay agreement for adult social care is hugely important. All the analysis shows that we have not got a sufficient workforce—it is a fragmented workforce—and that most people leaving social care leave social care to go to the NHS, because they can get on to an integrated framework for progression, which they do not have in social care.

I think all those things can be done before we even get to the bigger question. I do not think that we should rush the work that Louise Casey is doing—that is the right timetable—but I accept your challenge, that what we cannot do is to sit back until she gets to that part of her report, and to do nothing in the interim. I think that the money we have put in, the fair pay agreements and other measures are really important.

I should also say that that is among the reasons I commissioned Louise to report in two stages: first in 2026 and later in 2028. We can get the 2026 recommendations and start acting on them before we get to 2028. I do not agree with you totally that we should just go both feet in with all the reform right now—we need time on that—but I accept the thrust of your challenge, which is that we need to do things now, and that is why we are doing what we are doing in the interim.



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Q36 **Layla Moran:** Do you accept that much of that money, in fact, has not been able to get to the frontline because of the NICs increases? Social care sits outside so, while local authorities have had some money flow down to them, it barely covers the NICs increases for the social care providers.

The Prime Minister: It is £3.7 billion of additional funding. That is a huge uplift. It is 6.8% in cash terms.

Layla Moran: But the amount that is going to independent social care providers is about £800 million to local authorities.

The Prime Minister: It is £880 million.

Layla Moran: Indeed, which is about the bill for the NICs increase.

The Prime Minister: Look, it is a huge cash-terms increase that has gone through.

Layla Moran: Which isn't actually going to deliver anything new. It is just going to pay you.

The Prime Minister: Well, it is alongside the work that we are doing on carer's allowance. It is alongside the work that we are doing on fair pay agreements, which I do think will make a material difference. It is a significant amount of additional funding to the funding that was put in before, when, as you will know, there are quite significant budgetary constraints at the moment.

Q37 **Layla Moran:** Indeed. You see, the issue here is that we are trying to shift a dial. The money that you are talking about is always welcome, but it is barely shifting that dial. Do you recognise that there is a cost to not reforming the system as well—both a human cost, and a cost to getting people in work and keeping them in work?

The Prime Minister: Yes. That is why I want to reform the system. Absolutely.

Q38 **Layla Moran:** We are currently looking at this on the Health and Social Care Committee and have been surprised to find that the Government have barely looked at it through that lens. Perhaps an undertaking from you to look at it through that lens would help the Treasury to see what you and I clearly both see, which is that social care is worth investing in.

The Prime Minister: I have always approached this on the basis that the health service and social care are important for physical and mental health and the support that people need throughout their lives, but they are also hugely important to the economy, for reasons that we have just rehearsed in other answers. The obvious one is that the longer people are unable to go back into work, if that is what they want to do, the worse it is for them economically and for our economy more generally. The two go together. When we set out our plan for change, the No. 1 mission was economic growth, but all the others, to my mind, ladder up to that, including what we are doing on health and social care.

Q39 **Layla Moran:** One final slight about-turn: we heard a lot of the



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conversation about tariffs. You will know about President Trump's approach to our NHS in the past when it came to UK-US trade negotiations; he had his eye firmly on parts of the NHS. You have said publicly that nothing is off the table. Does that include everything to do with the NHS, which includes drug patents, negotiated prices for medicines and market access for US companies?

The Prime Minister: I have been very protective of the approach that we take to the NHS in any dealings with any other country, because it is our greatest asset and we are not trading it away. That is the approach that I take here.

Q40 **Layla Moran:** Including in all the areas that I have just mentioned?

The Prime Minister: Including the data that we hold, which is private information that must be held securely. I do think that there is work that we can do on what use we make of that data, not so much in trade agreements but right here in the United Kingdom, in terms of advancing our own understanding of medicines and preventive measures, but I take a protective approach when it comes to the NHS.

Q41 **Chair:** Prime Minister, when you responded to Ms Moran's questions about the Casey review, you seemed to indicate that some announcement or change will be introduced in 2026 in relation to social care. Did I hear you right?

The Prime Minister: You did. I am just checking my notes, because the timetable that we have set is for her work to be in two parts. The first part is 2026 and the second is 2028. I need to just double check those.

Q42 **Chair:** You seemed to indicate in response to Ms Moran that you would be moving faster on that first part. Is that right?

The Prime Minister: Yes. Louise is starting her work this month. I have asked her to do her work in two stages. The second of the stages is, "What are the major reforms that are needed, and therefore the cross-party work that needs to be done?". The first part is, "What are the deliverable changes that we can do right here, right now, without waiting for the wider reform?". I am as sure as I can be, but I cannot find the right page of my notes, that says it is 2026, so I am going to go for 2026 for the first part of the report; if I am wrong about that, I will write to you straightaway. But that is to deal with this point, which is a good point: let's not just wait until 2028, get towards an election and find there are problems along the way. Let's bank some of these changes as we go forward. That is why I split it into two parts, so that we get part one as a foundational stone to build on.

Q43 **Chair:** Thank you. Also, in that exchange you were talking about the national insurance contributions, particularly to support care workers, but local authorities and others are not getting enough extra money to pay for those employer national insurance contributions, so it is coming out of their core budget. Are you going to revisit that at all in your review of social care?



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The Prime Minister: As I say, the figure is not quite in front of me, but I think it is £880 million extra towards this aspect, which is adequate. We will always have a look at what is adequate, but that is precisely why it was put there, and it is much more funding than they have had to date.

Q44 **Chair:** If each individual care worker needs to have their national insurance paid, and indeed others, and if there is not enough to cover that, it comes out of core budgets.

The Prime Minister: Yes, but it is additional money that is being put in. The work we did at the Budget, and the decisions we made, are the very reason that we have been able to invest £26 billion extra in the NHS, which is beginning to make a difference. That is a question of political priorities, and I am glad that we put the money in the NHS, because that is the place it should be. It is beginning to make a difference.

Q45 **Chair:** It is just that there is always a trick—or not exactly a trick—that a Government promise something, make a change and then the public sector is not always funded to cover it. There is a gap there, which is important to acknowledge.

The Prime Minister: I appreciate that.

Q46 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Prime Minister, your welcome announcement on the abolition of NHS England gives a real opportunity to reset the finances of the NHS. Given that in recent years the health budget has gone up by 20%, but the primary care budget has gone up by only 10%, can I test some of your aspirations for local health provision—something people really care about, because it is very close to their lives? Can I start with health prevention, which will keep people healthier for longer, and keep people out of expensive hospitals? The public health grant has gone down in recent years. We spend a pretty small amount on health prevention compared with the total health budget. What can be done about that?

The Prime Minister: I am committed to prevention. If we are going to take on the challenge of health going forward, three things have to happen: we are going to need to go to a preventive model; we need to go to a model that is more community based, so that it is not the hospital that most people have to go to for healthcare; and we have to make much greater use of technology and AI, which goes back to the conversation that we had. Prevention has to be a large part of that, and I want to see more done on prevention, not less.

There are so many examples of this, and there is one that sticks in my mind: the most likely cause for admission to a children's hospital, for children aged eight to 10 up and down the country, is to have their teeth taken out, because their teeth have decayed. That is completely avoidable, and we absolutely have to get into the territory of prevention. I think AI and prevention go together, by the way. This is not so much prevention, but a stethoscope working with AI on all 60-year-olds will be able to tell most people whether they are going to have a heart problem of some sort



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and intercept it before it gets to the stage where they collapse and go to A&E.

There are so many examples, and my appetite for this is very high. First, I think it is the right thing to do. Secondly, as we live longer, we have more health conditions—living for a long time is a good thing, but we sometimes talk about it as though it is a great burden; it is a good thing, but we cannot just pump more money into the top of the silo of the NHS to service that. We have to change the way in which the NHS delivers.

Q47 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Very briefly, as you opened it up to dentistry, 24% of five-year-olds have signs of tooth decay at the moment. The major cause of hospital admissions for five to nine-year-olds is dentistry problems. Our recent Committee inquiry found, and was told by a senior health official, that the dental contract is not fit for purpose and needs starting again. What more can be done to transform dental services, particularly in the south-west—where my constituency is—where they are dire?

The Prime Minister: This is such an important issue. First, the contract needs to be renegotiated, and that is happening. We need to make sure that we have much better provision for urgent dental appointments. We have to deal with dental deserts, as they are called, which are places where nobody can actually get an NHS dentist. What we want to do is incentivise dentists who have just qualified, with a financial incentive, to stay in an area or go to an area where there is a desert. We have to get to grips with this.

It is ridiculous, because it is costing a fortune and wasting talents. I saw brilliant individuals at Alder Hey hospital who are dedicated to extracting teeth from children—their brilliant skills are being used for that. It is completely unacceptable. We have also just started our work on supervised tooth brushing at school. I know some people say, “Well, that’s the nanny state,” but—sorry—if the price of not doing that is a child going to Alder Hey hospital to have his or her teeth taken out, I do not mind supervised tooth brushing, I am afraid.

Q48 Sarah Champion: Hello, Prime Minister. You know that defence and foreign aid go hand in hand in preventing conflicts and dealing with humanitarian crises. Now you have slashed the aid budget, I am interested to hear who you think is safer in the world.

The Prime Minister: The aid budget was slashed in order to spend more money on defence and security. We are living in a very fragile world where it is absolutely imperative that we up our defence spending, which is what we have done, as you know, by direct transfer. That is not a decision I wanted to make. I absolutely did not want to make that decision, and it is important that we do a number of things off the back of it. One is being really clear about what our priorities are within the budget we have, in terms of Sudan, Gaza, Ukraine, etc. The second is committing that we need to get the aid budget back up, and I want to be really clear about that. The third thing is—



Sarah Champion: And can I—

The Prime Minister: Forgive me, because I think this is really important; it is a good challenge that you put to me. I do not think we can sit back as a Government and say that until we can get the aid budget back up again, we do not do anything. That is why I have had active discussions with the World Bank, other institutions, other countries and the private sector about how we can leverage aid financing in a different way, using the private sector, and how we can better co-ordinate and co-operate with other countries—you will know this at first hand—about the amount of money that goes into some countries or capacity and not into other countries. I have spoken to like-minded individuals—world leaders—who are up for a really in-depth discussion about how we do this differently in the interim, which I think is a good thing. I would like to work with you on that.

Q49 **Sarah Champion:** Let me focus on you and your vision. The Center for Global Development and Save the Children have done quite detailed analysis on the cuts that you have made. Basically, you will have to axe all bilateral support for education, water sanitation, nutrition, sexual and maternal health, and support for women and girls. You spoke about your vision. I am not sure what is left, but what is your vision for development going forward?

The Prime Minister: I think it is hugely important for countries that we want to work with, and that it is in our own interests to work with, in relation to our priorities. We have not yet gone through the priorities, so exactly what we will be able to do and not be able to do will be set out in due course, but we will be working through that.

Q50 **Sarah Champion:** But what is the vision? What do you want to do? We understand the financial constraints but, if you were starting with a blank canvas, what is your vision for development?

The Prime Minister: A healthier, thriving world, where we reduce conflict, tension, corruption and ill health, is the intention. Obviously, what I have to do is to balance that within the resource that we have and, at the same time, recognise that we are in a new era when it comes to defence and security in Europe. When I say we are in a new era for defence and security, that is not just words. Around the country, people really understand that we are in a much more volatile position than we have been in for a long time. Old assumptions about our defence and security, which have kept the peace for 80 years, are not as solid as they once appeared.

My job—my No. 1 responsibility—is to ensure the security and safety of this country, and I firmly believe the only way to do that is to ensure that NATO, which has been the cornerstone of that for 80 years, is the cornerstone for decades to come. The only way to ensure that that is the case is to rebalance the European element of defence and security against the US to ensure that, strategically, NATO lasts for many years to come.



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That is why I have given it such priority, because in my view we are in a very important point in our history.

Q51 Sarah Champion: Another cornerstone, I would argue, Prime Minister, is international law. I am not a lawyer, but it feels to many that Israel is acting without any accountability toward international law. You are a lawyer and our Prime Minister, so can you please tell us how the UK will comply with the International Court of Justice's legal opinion on Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine? Can you outline how the UK will implement our legal obligations under the UN General Assembly resolution?

The Prime Minister: Look: I was an international lawyer—I think that marks me down, not up—but of course I believe in international law, and I accept that it underpins everything that we do bilaterally and multilaterally.

Q52 Sarah Champion: What are we doing to hold countries to account?

The Prime Minister: We are members of various courts and institutions, and that is one way of holding countries to account. We also hold countries to account bilaterally in the discussions that we have at whatever level—whether that is leader to leader or Foreign Secretary to Foreign Secretary. We are critical of Russia as the aggressor in Ukraine because it is in breach of the UN charter. That is a rules-based system. It is the basis of our criticism. It is the reason that almost all allies across the world, particularly in Europe, are putting in the amount of money they are—because Russia is the aggressor and it is a rules-based system.

Q53 Sarah Champion: And Israel and the occupation of Palestine?

The Prime Minister: Again, I think the occupation is unlawful. We have said that, and that has been long-standing Government policy—in fact and in fairness, of the last Government as well. We are members of the international institutions.

Q54 Sarah Champion: I have spoken to many humanitarian workers around the world who feel that Israel is not being held to account, particularly when it comes to international humanitarian law. Will we be pushing for an inquiry into the 15 humanitarian workers who were killed on 23 March?

The Prime Minister: Oh, there has got to be an investigation into that. We have to be absolutely clear that we are not just talking about that isolated incident. There has not been enough aid getting into Gaza at speed and at pace for a very long time. The resumption of hostilities is the wrong thing, in my view. We need to get back to a ceasefire, we need to get aid in, we need to get the hostages out, and we need to put our foot in the door for a process—however remote it may seem today—towards a two-state solution, which is, in my view, the only way of guaranteeing peace in the long term. I do appreciate that that may seem a long way off at the moment.

Q55 Sarah Champion: This is my final question. I am interested that you have decoupled aid from the ODA commitments. If the Chancellor is right and GNI goes up—and, indeed, if the Home Office is right and they are



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able to get down the number of refugees who are in hotels in this country—will the aid budget go up as a consequence?

The Prime Minister: First, I am absolutely determined to get the hotel bill down, wherever it falls—it should not be falling where it is at the moment, so it needs to come down. It should not fall where it is falling.

I am not going to make a commitment to exactly what path we will take to get aid spending back up again, but I can tell you that that is what I want to do, because I do believe in what we have done with our aid and development for many years. That is where we want to get back to, but I do not want to wait until we get to that point; I want to act now to find other ways of doing what we need to do on aid and development with other partners, partner countries, the private sector and institutions. There is an appetite for this because other countries are in the same position as us when it comes to budgetary constraints, so they want this discussion.

Q56 **Mr Dhesi:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. Since Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine and the thousands of North Korean troops that came to help Russia invade Ukraine, President Zelensky has confirmed that two Chinese citizens fighting for Russia have been captured by Ukraine's military. What would your message be to the Chinese President?

The Prime Minister: I have only just seen that development. I have not had the opportunity to take advice from my intelligence and security advisers, nor the opportunity to talk to President Zelensky about it. I will very happily provide you with an answer but, if you will forgive me, I want to make sure that we have got to the bottom of what we think has happened before giving a definitive answer here. I will obviously be taking intelligence and security advice on it, and we will obviously talk to the Ukrainians about it.

Q57 **Mr Dhesi:** Since you last appeared before the Committee, there is a new Administration in the White House with very different defence and economic priorities. It has certainly disrupted the status quo, and has considerable defence and national security implications for our country. You recently announced an increase in defence spending, but given the raised level of real threats that, as a nation, we face, will that be enough—especially given the recent geopolitical earthquake, with the US effectively saying that European nations, more or less, have to fend for themselves?

The Prime Minister: Let me unpack that because there are two or three strands to it, all of which are important. First, the commitment to 2.5% by '27-28 is the highest sustained increase since the cold war, so it is a significant increase in spending—and then on to 3% in the next Parliament, in accordance with fiscal and general circumstances. I do think that is the adequate response at the moment.

In relation to the second part of your question, I think it is right to say that Europe has not done enough on its own security and defence for some time. I do not think it is just this President of America who has said that; previous Presidents have said that. I accept that challenge. I think that, particularly in the circumstances we are in, we need to rise to that



challenge. I think that this moment has been coming since Russian tanks went across the border into Ukraine just over three years ago, and it is important that we have now acted. I do not see that as an argument for Europe to, as it were, go it alone in its own collective self-defence and decouple from the US. I strongly believe that we have had 80 years of peace in Europe because of the alliance with the US, and because of NATO. Our task now is to ensure that we lock that alliance in for the future. That means that Europe must do more, so we are talking to our European partners about that.

In direct answer to your question, "Is 2.5% enough?", there are lessons from Ukraine that we need to learn with our European partners. One is better co-ordination of our capabilities, because many European allies have made capability available to Ukraine but it has not been as easy as you might think for Ukraine to make the best use of that capability because in the past we have not co-ordinated what we are doing. We also need to think carefully about how, if we are all increasing defence spending, we do that as a group of countries in the most effective way. That is a live discussion that is going on at the moment, which goes beyond the pure question of percentages.

Q58 Mr Dhesi: We of course need to work with our allies, especially in Europe, and you have done a great deal of work with respect to that, but what have you done to ensure that UK defence companies are not elbowed out of the EU's €150 billion defence fund and subsequent contracts?

The Prime Minister: First, we should welcome the defence fund. That is a significant step forward by the EU and gives, to my mind, some real leadership on that issue. As you know, third countries are not locked out of that fund; it depends on defence and security arrangements with the EU. Therefore, I do think there is a way for us to work with the EU on this issue. I have welcomed it; I want to work with the EU on it. It is very important that our defence companies are involved. We have got some of the best capability in this country, and we need to ensure that those companies are able to be an essential element of this.

Q59 Mr Dhesi: We are definitely at a pivotal moment for our collective defence and security in our continent, but do you agree that now is not the time for European nations to be prioritising fisheries over defence, and that now is a time for unity and solidarity?

The Prime Minister: Now you are tempting me to get into a—I think that we can have a much better relationship with our EU partners on defence, security, energy, trade and our economy. I am determined that we will be ambitious in what we trying to seek. Of course there are issues such as fisheries that are important to any discussions. Necessarily, because of the nature of the agreement that was signed by Boris Johnson, you have to visit this periodically in any event.

One of the things I said at the beginning of this process was that the best way to make progress in our discussions is not to do it through what I call megaphone diplomacy, where we all go to the papers or the media and



shout about things that may or may not be frustrating. I do think we can make some real progress on these issues, but I am not going to be tempted into inflammatory language, which will make it harder, not easier.

Q60 Mr Dhesi: Agreed—without mentioning any nations.

Lastly, you have done a great deal of work on the international reassurance force—a coalition of the willing. How many British forces will be involved in that, and will there be a US backstop?

The Prime Minister: The way that we have taken it forward with the coalition of the willing is to create the political momentum through the countries that meet at leader level around the table. Emmanuel Macron and I are bringing that together and doing what we can to provide the leadership to that political grouping. We have then tasked the military side to do the detailed operations on land, air and sea. The stage we have got to now is with our senior defence officials working very closely with Ukrainians on what that might look like and where it is going to be deployed.

Obviously, there is a lot of optionality at the moment because we have not got a deal—we do not know exactly what will be needed—but that is where we have got to. I cannot give you numbers and dates, but it is broken down into various categories: a plan for what we are going to do in the air, a plan for what we can do in the sea and a plan for on the ground. The key is now to build that around Ukraine's own capability—so it is not a substitute for it. That is why I have had my team in Ukraine in recent days in that detailed discussion with the Ukrainians and others.

Q61 Chi Onwurah: Prime Minister, you have embraced science and technology as drivers of growth. Platform technology and AI are dominated by a small number of US companies. Your Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, Peter Kyle, said that these companies are so powerful that the UK needs to treat them as sovereign states. Is that what you are doing, and how is that reflected in trade talks with the US?

The Prime Minister: They are very powerful companies, many of them based in the US. We are very attractive on AI as well, obviously. We are among the top three in the world when it comes to AI, with fantastic capability here. We want to work with, and are working with, those sectors wherever they are.

In relation to trade talks, obviously there are questions about the appropriate way to tax digital services and so on. There are questions about how technology impacts free speech. I have been very clear in my view that we need to have an arrangement for a digital tax of some sort. Equally, we need to be pioneers of free speech, which we have been for very many years in this country. At the same time, we rightly protect people under the Online Safety Act, further provisions of which are coming into force pretty quickly. When it comes to dealing with paedophiles and protecting children, I take a pretty strong line that we take the necessary measures in order to do so.



Q62 Chi Onwurah: At a time when we are desperately seeking investment, part of the power of these sovereign companies is in their pocketbooks. Google's R&D budget is over twice your Government's; Microsoft's market cap is three quarters of our entire GDP; and of the £63 billion announced at the October investment summit, which you mentioned, two fifths were from the United States.

Is it not inevitable that British tech policy will be made in silicon valley? How can we ensure that the benefits of investment—growth, jobs, skills and security—are fully captured by communities and businesses in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: You will no doubt have seen the AI action plan earlier this year, which sets out how we want to interact with those businesses and with the sector generally. That has been welcomed across the piece in relation to the framework that we put around this. We obviously now need to move that forward.

On the second part of your question, which is about how it is felt in communities here, the investment is investment into this country and into data centres. We have set up growth zones for AI. I think that there is huge potential for us in relation to AI. As we go into this revolution, which undoubtedly it will be, we are not starting in the same place as other countries. We are already right at the top in our capability, with what we have got in this country and with the individuals who have been leading it for us, who are extraordinary.

Q63 Chi Onwurah: I think it is clear that we have huge strengths when it comes to AI, Prime Minister. My question was more about the investment and our sovereignty over the impacts of the investment, given that we do not have control of the funding for that investment and given that those investment decisions are not being made in the UK.

I will move on to the summer riots that followed the misinformation on the terrible Southport attack, which was amplified by TikTok, Facebook and X, as well as by Russian bot networks. The Online Safety Act, which you mentioned and which is currently being implemented, does not tackle misinformation. That may be why the tech companies told my Committee's inquiry that the Act would not have changed anything. How is your Government addressing misinformation? Will you take action against the algorithms that amplify misinformation and the bot networks that spread it?

The Prime Minister: In relation to the information that was being put online in the immediate aftermath of the Southport murders, the first thing that was important to establish was that where that information incited violence, it was already unlawful. There was a sense among some people that somehow online was a law-free zone; I think it was important that we established the principle that it is not, and therefore where people incite action can be taken against them.

Chi Onwurah: Yes, I agree.



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The Prime Minister: In relation to misinformation, obviously there were provisions being argued about here in relation to the Online Safety Bill, which did not make their way into the Act. We need to look at what we can do. Gauging what is information and what is misinformation is always difficult to police, and we have to be proportionate about how we do it.

Q64 **Chi Onwurah:** The deliberate spreading of false information—disinformation—threatens our security and our democracy. China spends between £8 billion and £10 billion a year on information operations; Russia spends about half that. What are we spending to counter state-backed online disinformation? Do we have the powers to effectively enforce regulations on global platforms?

The Prime Minister: On state actors, we do bear down on it. It is among the things we look at in our security work. As to exactly how much, I do not know off the top of my head, but I am very happy to write to you or to the Committee, whichever is most appropriate, with more information on this.

Q65 **Chi Onwurah:** Thank you. Finally—I just need a one-word answer—in a changing world, sovereign capability is reassuring and ensures we develop the requisite home-grown skills, but we do not have a sovereign, foundational AI capability. Can we defend ourselves without one: yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we can—of course we can—but we should always be ambitious about what else we can do.

Q66 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Prime Minister, in the Government's plan for change, national security is quite rightly described as the first duty of Government. As you know, defining national security and making judgments about it is not always straightforward.

For 28 years, the family of Sean Brown have been seeking truth and justice in relation to his murder. The coroner could not move on last year, because material was being withheld on grounds of national security. I have met Mrs Brown and her daughters. They showed me 56 pages of blocked-out text—but not one word on any of them, Prime Minister. The coroner has said that there should be a public inquiry. The Chief Constable of the PSNI has said, "This lack of disclosure about offences as serious as murder would simply not be tolerated elsewhere in the United Kingdom." The court has now told the Government, twice, that a public inquiry is currently the only way for Sean Brown's family, including his 87-year-old widow, to obtain the truth that they have waited for. What do the Government plan to do?

The Prime Minister: The Secretary of State has been clear that we want to see a full investigation into the murder of Sean Brown—that is the first position. Obviously, we acknowledge the recent Court of Appeal judgment, and secondly, we are fully considering it, because it is a concerning case, for all the reasons that you have set out.

Q67 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** But what does this ruling now mean? The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is being told that ICRIR is not fit for purpose



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and not suitable in this case. What does this actually mean for the Government's timetable for introducing primary legislation to replace the legacy Act?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we do not delay what we need to do in relation to the repeal and replacement of the legacy Act. We need to get on with that, but we also need to carefully consider the Court of Appeal judgment. The primary position is still that there needs to be a proper criminal investigation into what happened in that particular case.

Q68 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Reconciliation, as you know, requires constructive relations with the Republic of Ireland. We visited Dublin recently and heard from a range of stakeholders. We have also taken evidence from a number of victims' and survivors' organisations in Northern Ireland, and they all say that the Irish Government, as well as the UK Government, are not doing enough to address the legacy of the past. Are you able to tell us what the Government are doing to work with the Irish Government to develop the new mechanisms that are needed to address the past? Do you believe that the current work and the pace of work is adequate and good enough?

The Prime Minister: First, let me acknowledge what you are saying. As you know, I worked in Northern Ireland for five years; I therefore know at first hand how acutely these issues are felt in all communities and how important it is for us to build trust and confidence in what is undoubtedly a really difficult part of the process. My years in Northern Ireland were very formative for me personally and matter hugely to me.

In relation to the second part of your question, it is really important that we work very closely with the Republic of Ireland—of course it is. I think we have got relations between the UK and Ireland into a much better position now than they had been in for many years. We had a summit a few months ago in which we set out our ambition for how much further we could take this. Among the things we discussed was this very issue, in terms of areas in which we need to work more closely together. I remain committed to that.

Q69 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Do you envisage a change in the remit and structure of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery in the way that the chief commissioner, Sir Declan Morgan, seems to advocate, which will then include direct participation by the Republic of Ireland?

The Prime Minister: This is what the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is currently engaged on. I know at first hand that it must have the confidence of victims in particular if we are to make real progress. We will therefore continue to work on the basis of trying to get that confidence into the work that we are doing. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is working very hard and is actively engaged in it. He is well respected, and that is among the reasons why I appointed him to the shadow post and then reappointed him as the Secretary of State when we won the election.



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Q70 **Chair:** Prime Minister, our colleagues on the Joint Committee on Human Rights, like all of us, are concerned about instances of foreign Governments moving beyond their borders to take action and persecute people in the UK. We have had the Hong Kong authorities targeting individuals; the shocking situation with Yulia Skripal and Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in 2018; and activity by Iran persecuting journalists here in the UK. How are you planning to address transnational repression practice, particularly when you are having diplomatic meetings with some of the countries where this is perpetrated?

The Prime Minister: First, you highlight a really important issue: state action in this country, which is growing, and state-based threats. We need to be aware that that is growing, and I can assure the Committee that it is an important strand of the work that we are doing on defence and security all the time now. It is constantly raised in international discussions that we have, for very obvious reasons, but it is a serious threat; I think we generally underestimate that threat, and it is very important that we are alive to it.

Q71 **Chair:** The Government are reviewing the UK's approach to transnational repression. When are you planning to publish that review? If you do not know, perhaps you could write to us.

The Prime Minister: I do not know off the top of my head, but I will make sure that I find out and send the details to the Committee.

Chair: Thank you. Could you write to us and to the Joint Committee on Human Rights?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can write to you, to them or to both.

Q72 **Chair:** That is fine.

You might well be aware that this House has hosted Members of the UK Youth Parliament in the Chamber. It recently had its annual sitting. It is made up of more than 300 young people aged between 11 and 18—we had all better watch out for our jobs, having seen what they did on the day. We caught up with them on our podcast "Committee Corridor", which I should perhaps put an advert in for. I am sure it is your top listening material, and maybe that will be part of your preparation next time.

We asked them what question they would put to you if they were here, so let me ask you what they wanted to ask. They highlighted the fact that the Government promised in their manifesto to lower the voting age to 16 for UK Parliament elections and local elections in England and Northern Ireland; of course, in Scotland it is there already. The commitment was not included in the King's Speech, so they want to know when they might see legislation coming forward on the issue.

The Prime Minister: We will definitely get it done. It is a manifesto commitment and we intend to honour it. I think that if you are old enough to go out to work and to pay your taxes, you are entitled to have a say on how your taxes are spent. Also, we do have voting at a younger age in



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different parts of the United Kingdom, and the sky has not fallen in. It is a commitment we made; it is a commitment we intend to keep.

Q73 **Chair:** Okay, so you are trusting 16-year-olds with that. They also wanted to know whether you think there should be more political education. That is certainly something that they want to see, so that if they are voting at 16 they can be well educated in making their decisions as a voter.

The Prime Minister: I would term it more as education about citizenship, rather than as pure political indoctrination—citizenship, how the state works, how you participate in it and what the institutions and structures are. I am very pleased to see that that is part of the curriculum, and I think it is important that everybody learns about citizenship.

Q74 **Chair:** There is a curriculum review going on with the Secretary of State for Education. Are you leaning into seeing more political education? Can I read that into what you have just said?

The Prime Minister: I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of that review, but there is a review going on—you are absolutely right about that.

Chair: Prime Minister, may I thank you very much indeed for coming today? To those who are listening or watching and want to pore over every word that the Prime Minister has said today, the transcript will be available on the website uncorrected in the next couple of days.

We hope that you get a bit of a break over the Easter weekend—

The Prime Minister: I don't want to tempt fate.

Chair: Especially in the middle of all the major challenges that are going on around the world. I think it is fair to say that all of us wish you all the best in negotiations over tariffs and the big global economic shocks that we have been facing this week.

The Prime Minister: I appreciate that. Thank you to the Committee.