HOUSE OF LORDS

International Relations and Defence Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: Strategic Defence Review 2025

Wednesday 2 July 2025

2.30 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord De Mauley (The Chair); Lord Alderdice; Baroness Blackstone; Lord Bruce of Bennachie; Baroness Coussins; Baroness Crawley; Lord Darroch of Kew; Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie; Lord Grocott; Lord Houghton of Richmond; Baroness Morris of Bolton; Lord Soames of Fletching.

Evidence Session No. 1 Heard in Public Questions 1 - 14

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, Former Defence Secretary and NATO Secretary General and Review Leader at Strategic Defence Review 2025; General Sir Richard Barrons, Former Commander of Joint Forces Command and Reviewer at Strategic Defence Review 2025; Dr Fiona Hill, Chancellor of Durham University and Former US Presidential Advisor and Reviewer at Strategic Defence Review 2025.

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Examination of witnesses

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, General Sir Richard Barrons and Dr Fiona Hill.

Q1 **The Chair:** Welcome, Lord Robertson, General Sir Richard Barrons and Dr Fiona Hill. Thank you very much indeed for sparing the time for this session this afternoon. This is a one-off oral evidence session on the Strategic Defence Review. The session will be streamed live on the Parliament website and a transcript will be taken. Once it is available, we will send each of you a copy of it in case you would like to make small corrections.

Members, I remind us all that if we have interests pertinent to a question we should declare them. I also should say I am afraid it is not impossible that there will be Divisions this afternoon. With any luck, we will have done our business by the time that happens, but we may have to suspend the session for 10 minutes. I hope that is all right.

Lord Robertson, I do not know whether you would like to start off with some opening remarks or whether we plunge straight into questions.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Can I say a couple of things? First, we were grateful to have the views of this committee—

The Chair: Including yourself.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: —passed on to us. Among the 8,000 submissions that we received, it was one of the most substantial and beautifully printed, it has to be said.

All 8,000 submissions were given due consideration. We had to use artificial intelligence to scrutinise them. Otherwise, we would still be reading the material there as well. We want to put on record the fact that the consultation was deep and thorough and extended right across the board. We had submissions from Parliament and we had them from the department, from think tanks, from academic institutions and a lot of it from members of the public, too.

Therefore, the outcome of the review now is a distillation of the evidence that we received and our view on how we interpreted that evidence. I will leave it there and answer your questions.

Q2 **The Chair:** Thank you so much. I shall kick off. While the Strategic Defence Review rightly emphasises NATO and Euro-Atlantic security, a few other theatres are strategically important to us. Particularly in our minds I guess at the moment are the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East. How should the Government address emerging and persistent threats in those theatres, bearing in mind the obligations in the NATO sphere as well? Particularly given financial constraints, how should priorities be balanced across these regions?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The review is quite clear that it is NATO first but not NATO alone. We have responsibilities to dependent territories and to overseas bases and they must matter. The Indo-Pacific area was

highlighted by the last Government's integrated review. We take a different view about the priorities, especially in the Euro-Atlantic space and our responsibilities there, as well as the homeland. Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty makes it clear that countries have a responsibility to defend themselves.

The aircraft carrier battle group is at the moment in the Indo-Pacific region, near Singapore. We took evidence that suggested, especially from the Americans in the region, that they did not need to have a permanent presence of the United Kingdom there and that an occasional visit would be enough to be an ingredient in the thought processes of those in that region.

Of course, in the review we endorse AUKUS, the plan to build nuclear-powered submarines in Australia. We have an interest in that area, but we make it clear that in terms of priority, clearly, the Euro-Atlantic area and our responsibilities there take precedence.

General Sir Richard Barrons: I will make a couple of additions to that, if I may. First, we resisted the sense that the UK's many interests beyond NATO are necessarily only or best serviced by the military. If we have to prioritise UK force elements in the NATO area, a lot can be done by diplomacy, technology co-operation, climate co-operation, academic co-operation and all those things that matter, which in many cases matter more to our partners in the world than the occasional military exercise.

However, we were clear in the review that the UK must be able to do two things. First, we must maintain a global counterterrorism strike capability. We must be able to remove threats to the UK that manifest themselves somewhere else in the world that we cannot afford to allow to travel to our own shores. Secondly, we must maintain an expectation that British citizens in trouble are got out of trouble, so we need a global crisis response capability that touches all three services. It may be needed only occasionally, but it is often needed at short notice. We have preserved that in the review.

The Chair: Dr Hill, do you have anything to add?

Dr Fiona Hill: I have one thing to add to all of this. It would be a mistake to view the way that we have structured the report, if indeed that is the case—I do not think it is but to stress this—to suggest that somehow the Euro-Atlantic space is divorced from what happens in the Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific. For all the members here, particularly as you look across the globe at the moment, we can see the interconnections of all the conflicts. We have China supporting Russia in its invasion and continued war in Ukraine and we have North Korean troops visible on the battlefield and in support of Russia. In fact, today I saw before I came on air a video feed—and many of you might have seen this—of Kim Jong-un mourning the North Korean troops lost in battle during a commemoration ceremony at which Russian officials were present. That brings home how interconnected the global threat perspective is.

It would be a mistake to think somehow, even as we prioritise the North Atlantic, this means that the Indo-Pacific and the Asia-Pacific theatre is not relevant. We did not suggest that. Certainly I hope that is in your deliberations and thinking about this. Unlike in the United States, where there seems to be an idea that these are siloed, that is not the case globally. Presumably, you and others are thinking about this.

Q3 **Lord Alderdice:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you very much for the report. As was clear from the debate about it, it was extremely well received, as indeed it should be.

I want to probe a little bit this question of NATO first. NATO is an alliance, but it is manifestly clear that not all NATO members always agree on things, priorities, expenditure, how things should be conducted. Could you say a little bit about how you feel a NATO-first approach would not come at the expense of strategic autonomy or operational independence of our own country and our decisions about what we thought was best and appropriate for expenditure or indeed for strategy and operations?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: It is a good question because NATO's key weakness is the fact that it is made up of 32 countries with 32 Governments and 32 Parliaments and 32 public opinions, but also its huge and towering strength is that it is made up of 32 democracies as well. Therefore, the Secretary General's job is to corral that into a sensible, coherent set of defensive arrangements. I did it with 19 countries; Mark Rutte is doing it with 32 countries, and I congratulated him yesterday on getting a communiqué out there because it is not just herding cats—having one big cat in the mix makes it even more difficult.

There is no reason why any of the individual countries need to subordinate their own individual interests. They do and they have asserted themselves in the past. When the invasion of Iraq came along—and I was there—a number of countries were participating with the United States at that time and others were not. Then, when Libya came along, the Americans said they did not want to get engaged and then Prime Minister Cameron and President Sarkozy then led, using NATO instruments, dealing with Colonel Gaddafi at that time. The alliance is flexible and, therefore, I do not see it in any way compromising Britain's particular independence.

We also have to face the fact that we would never go into a conflict now alone. We would go in with allies, and that is the great strength of NATO, which eventually every American Administration recognises. Sometimes it takes them a bit longer than others to recognise, but it is in their interests that they have 31 allies around that table every week on their side, essentially, as well.

Lord Alderdice: It appears that the United States is pivoting more to the east and to the Indo-Pacific. Does that move it outside of much of the interest of NATO, or does it not make any great difference?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: All the individual countries have their own interests. Our interests in the Commonwealth and the French interests in Africa are all accommodated within the structure. But if the Americans are going to tilt much more towards the Indo-Pacific, the Europeans will have to do more in their own interests. Maybe Dr Hill could give you a unique perspective on that.

Lord Alderdice: Thank you very much. Dr Hill, did you have any thoughts about it?

Dr Fiona Hill: Yes. To amplify what Lord Robertson has said, it is evident from all the developments over the last several months, notwithstanding relatively successful management—let us put it that way—of the recent NATO summit, that the UK and other European allies within the NATO European pillar, along with Canada, will have to step up to do more, as Lord Robertson has said.

There is no question—and I alluded to that in my remarks earlier—that the United States is debating at all times about where its commitments lie. The Asia-Pacific, again, seems to be viewed as siloed from everywhere else. Facts can confirm that that is not the case. It is also the intertwining with the Middle East. The recent action against Iran and the fact that Iran remains also supportive of Russia's war in Ukraine adds additional complexities on top of China and North Korea.

However, we have seen today and in the last 24 hours or so an announcement that the United States is suspending some of its deliveries of munitions, in particular to Ukraine, because of its own concerns about military stocks in the event of some crisis elsewhere. The United States is certainly picking and choosing about where, literally, it wants to fight its battles at the moment. That should be a strong message to the United Kingdom and to other European NATO members and Canada that they will have to step up.

We prefigured that clearly in the report. The report lays out this factor. We had perhaps a rather subtly worded assessment of this state of affairs. I know that that this committee is also looking closely at the UK-US relationship, which is important to review at this particular juncture.

Lord Alderdice: Thank you very much. Does General Sir Richard Barrons want to say anything?

General Sir Richard Barrons: I will talk more at the level of capability here. It is important to be clear that the UK must retain strategic autonomy over some things. We want to be clear about the boundary of those things. We maintain an independent nuclear deterrent. We maintain our global counterterrorist hostage rescue capability. No one else will necessarily do that for us. We have responsibilities to the overseas territories, places like the Falklands, which no one else will help us with.

Some capabilities require, in my view, a sovereign underpinning, such as cryptography. We must be able to keep our own communications secret. We invest as a nation in strong combat air maritime shipbuilding capability and complex weapons—cruise missiles particularly. We are about, as a result of the review, to invest more in onshoring munitions production. The Government has talked about six factories. We have world-class cyber capability in GCHQ. None of those was found to be contentious.

In the context of NATO, we want to be clear that talking about strategic autonomy has a financial aspect. If you want the UK to have complete military sovereign autonomy, the bill will be, to my mind, considerably more than double what it is now. Even if you do that, geography has not changed. One advantage of a collective security arrangement with NATO is not just that it is a pay-to-play excursion—you contribute but you share greater benefits—but it also means that arguably between the UK and its enemies are other countries and their capabilities. When you are defending access to space, your airspace, your maritime cables, pipelines, and trade, you cannot do it on the goal line at home. You need friends. The autonomy argument is often more complicated than people want to think.

Q4 **Lord Darroch of Kew:** This question follows on from what Lord Robertson and Dr Hill said earlier about the nature of the UK-US relationship. First, congratulations on the report, which is an impressive piece of work. It is comprehensive and it is quite radical and so much better than its predecessor when I was in government. Congratulations on it.

The review describes the US as the UK's closest defence and security ally, citing a long-standing shared commitment to global security. However, as you have already alluded to, US strategic priorities seem to be shifting, which has potential implications for both transatlantic cohesion and for how NATO will look in the future. I wonder if you could say a bit more about how the UK should shape its defence and security relationship with the US in response to these changes.

As a supplementary to that, as Dr Hill said, the report is quite subtle about this issue. With hindsight—given that the US President, although he took his victory lap at the NATO summit and has contributed to this quite striking rise in promises of defence expenditure, continues to be quite ambiguous about Article 5—should you have been more explicit about the challenge of this change in the report?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: No, we should or could not have been. In areas we have had to be politic. This report is written by external reviewers but it is a government report. We went through the process—a unique process—of looking at every issue in defence, but doing it in tandem with the Defence Secretary, whom we met almost every week, and with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, whom we met on several occasions. If we have pulled punches, it is because that is the nature of a government review at present.

We have still made the points quite bluntly and, as you congratulate us on it, it is quite radical and quite bold in many areas that an internal review could not have been. That was accepted by government. Some of the recommendations may well be uncomfortable for the Government to implement, but they have accepted all of them and say that they will all be funded.

The variations in the politics of the transatlantic relationship have always been and will always be a complication in a defence alliance that has multiple countries. At the moment, one individual in the White House who, as you say, has been somewhat ambiguous in the past about Article 5, but not this time. He signed up to the communiqué, which is quite explicit in what it says, but if it means the Europeans will have to sort the imbalance that exists inside the alliance at the moment, it is one lesson that we get from the particular politics that is going on in the United States at the moment.

Dr Hill is closer to what is going on over there and maybe she has a view.

Dr Fiona Hill: It goes without saying for anybody observing both inside and outside that the United States is in a revolutionary moment. A Bill has just passed here, at least through the Senate—it still has to go back to the House—that charts a rather rocky financial future for the United States that will constrain its capacities and abilities to act in the future as well.

As Lord Robertson has already said, the US-Europe and certainly the US-UK relationship has always been complicated. If we look historically, the relationship has had a lot of ups and downs but does, however, remain remarkably close. We still have US representatives embedded in the UK Armed Forces and vice versa. We have close relationships at the NATO command in Norfolk, Virginia, for example, which is in charge of the whole North Atlantic region. We are intertwined through all the critical national infrastructure that both Lord Robertson and General Barrons have already laid out, too.

In fact, on a number of occasions when we were talking to our American counterparts—and Lord Darroch will remember this from his conversations as well—they kept emphasising how much the United Kingdom was a strategic hub. In fact, one of our interlocutors described the United Kingdom like Hawaii, which gave us a little bit of a pause for thought. That immediate analogy does not spring to mind. However, it has, due to its geographical location, geopolitical and geostrategic importance and as a hub for communications maritime in the North Atlantic, like in the Pacific for Hawaii, of course.

In many respects, the UK and the United States cannot do without each other. The defence of the UK does become important for the United States and vice versa. Despite all the disputes and all the differences over all kinds of things, we are still intertwined whether we like it or not.

The biggest challenge for the UK and other allies, perhaps even more so than the United States because it will take the United States a long while to face up to some of the things it might be losing by choice at this particular moment, is to look not just at some of the issues that have already been spelled out here but at the information space. What we are seeing at the moment in the United States is the stripping of databases of critical information that was accessible to the public and to allies at large, everything from meteorological information, the weather and climate data, which our Armed Forces also rely on, to public health and all kinds of other information. We will have to address that.

As Lord Robertson said, this has a financial implication as well. We have been able to take advantage—the NATO alliance has overall—of an enormous amount of data that is collected by the United States. It may simply be the United States no longer has the capacity, financial and otherwise, to collect that information. We will have to think about not just how we do this for sovereign purposes, as Lord Alderdice had already asked us, but also for collective purposes for the rest of the North Atlantic alliance. That will be an important issue to look at.

We skirted around this in the report because, of course, what exactly will happen is unpredictable, but we did lay out the importance of doing more in the information space, particularly digital, AI and on an intelligence front as well. The United Kingdom has special expertise and a great strength in all these areas and we will have to lean into it even more. The United Kingdom can be a leader in that regard in the alliance.

General Sir Richard Barrons: If I may, it was not a surprise to the review that it would have to contend with the thought that the US would do less for European security because people such as you have been saying so for more than 20 years. They have been messaging clearly that an arrangement that worked in 1949 was unjustified in 2025.

However, the events of February, the remarks made at the Munich Security Conference in particular, created this much greater sense of uncertainty as to whether this US reduction would have a cliff edge or whether there was scope for a managed reduction over time. The latter is manageable. A cliff edge would come with some major operational challenges and an enormous bill. We were careful not to precipitate a drama by illuminating it when it was not clear. So far, not much has changed.

The second thing that is clear is, for the technology that you need to underpin the transformation we set out, you need US civil technology. You need AI, space-based capability, cyber technology, robotics and autonomy. It would be madness, as a matter of policy, to try to separate ourselves from that massive R&D expenditure, which we have not contributed to at all but which can underpin our transformation. We would not want to volunteer for that.

On the other hand, now is not the time to lock the military into US-only standards. They have to be NATO standards and to step around the ITAR

regime because the US will do less for European security. That means Europe will have to raise its game and we can see that playing out in many ways now.

That takes us to Article 5, which has always had more wriggle room attached to it than people wanted to believe. It is, essentially, an exercise of confidence and commitment. It is not just the US within NATO that might sometimes equivocate over Article 5. The northern nations and the southern nations have a difference of view over what the priorities might be. My view is, when NATO is faced with a single monolithic challenge, which is Russia or—less likely—an alien invasion, it finds it easier to coalesce than it does over relatively small things.

However, the review also focuses very much on the Joint Expeditionary Force's group of northern European nations to which the UK is the framework, essentially like a "Band of Brothers" arrangement. That is one way of hedging against an equivocation when you have a less-than-existential crisis in NATO. You are already closely wound in with your near partners and you can carry more water in the alliance that way and also credibly underpin UK national and regional defence.

It is a complex arena. At the heart of it, the review is clear. We have this discussion because we are now managing the potential for existential risk to our life and prosperity and values, not discretionary or marginal things of the 1990s, for example. In that context, this matters. We must do everything we can to invest in collective security in ways that reduce uncertainty and increase the degree of deterrence.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: General Barrons is quite ready to lead the campaign against the alien force.

Q5 **Baroness Coussins:** In relation not only to the UK-US relationship but globally, another issue that was not addressed explicitly in the report—and arguably not even implicitly—is soft power, even though aspects of soft power have clear connections to some of the overarching themes that run through your report, such as the need for a whole-of-society engagement and being strong abroad through resilience and reputation. I wonder if you could say something about the thinking between you in the process of the review that led to your decision that soft power should not even merit a single paragraph in the continuum of defence.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I am a strong believer, as you probably know, in the value and the importance of soft power in the world today. I deeply regret how the British Council is treated, even by the present Government, never mind the last Government, because that is the influence of our country abroad.

However, this is a Strategic Defence Review and we were given specific terms of reference to deal with within that. The Government last week produced a national security strategy and you would have thought that is where the whole issue about how other elements of security would be

built in. We confined ourselves—and it was difficult enough to do—to the defence aspects of national security.

To have gone beyond that would have involved other departments of state. Although we had a Foreign Office embed and a Home Office embed, a Treasury embed and an Industry Department embed in the team that we were operating with, which was not fully recognised, we kept our constraint, essentially, within the defence elements of that. If we had wandered outside of that, I assure you that every other government department would have wanted to—as Richard once said—hang baubles on the Christmas tree. We wanted to focus on the Christmas tree and let the national security strategy deal with the other aspects.

Baroness Coussins: Would you not say that defence diplomacy, which is a term that the report refers to, should include our cultural defences and that you should have perhaps taken a broader look at the definition of defence, given that you talk about these other things like reputation, resilience and the whole of society?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The terms of reference constrained us, which was inevitable without allowing other government departments to do the trade-offs that would have been involved. If you look at the integrated review that the last Government produced, it was good and it was fine and it was eminently agreeable, but it did not have priorities and it was the product of a whole lot of trade-offs between the individual departments to do with that. We certainly majored on defence diplomacy and Lord Coaker is now in charge of that element of the defence policy. You might want to interrogate him in the future about how he sees that developing.

Baroness Coussins: I will be doing that.

Q6 **Lord Soames of Fletching:** George, I remember well when you were Secretary of State for Defence and the great efforts that you made to increase defence diplomacy. It is important, and any diminishing in that is not in our interest at all. I do not know who would be best to open on the answer to this, but how do you as a group assess the Government's recent defence pledges at the NATO summit, and how does that fit in with the recommendations that you made in the SDR?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I will briefly say they are welcome, and we wait to see how they will be delivered. Anyway, I will ask Richard to expand on that issue.

General Sir Richard Barrons: First, the SDR recommendations that we agreed with the Government are all affordable within the profile we were given, which is 2.5% of GDP from 2027-28—so still two years away—rising to 3% by no later than 2034. Within that envelope, everything we say can be done.

Some would argue that, in the world we live in, that programme will need to be delivered sooner and maybe augmented a bit. The honest position

is, if you want to do that or if you feel you must do that, you will have to find more money sooner. Talk now of 5% of GDP, 3.5% by 2035 on hard defence and 1.5% on defence-rated infrastructure, which is a broad church, is good news because, in theory, making that money available—and it is a long way down the track—would allow our programme to be enacted faster and in some cases better. That would be a good thing.

However, we could not master two important features. First, we were confined to a debate about 3% or 3.5% of GDP. We were talking about what we can afford to do to reset deterrence based on the credible ability to fight. The conversation we never had is whether we should price that against the potential cost of failing to deter, which you can see playing out in Ukraine since 2014 and definitely since 2022. If deterrence fails and you end up fighting, based on historical precedent, the cost is at least a quarter of your GDP and, if it goes as badly as the early years of the Second World War, it is about 53% of your GDP, plus all the destruction—which in the case of Ukraine is $500 million so far at least—plus all the death and injury, which scars three generations. Russia has taken a million casualties in Ukraine. Having a discussion that focuses on 3% or 5% gets a lot of attention, but there is less attention on deterring in a harder world and how the cost of not deterring is infinitely greater and, therefore, this 3.5% is the bargain of the century. Maybe we should have that argument.

Secondly—and we could see this and we have seen it play out even since we handed in our homework—is that some in government absolutely understand that the world we live in means we will have to spend more on defence sooner than we thought and maybe sooner than we would like. Others in government do not sense the imperative to do this. They do not sense their voters saying, "Please do this at the expense of the things I want", whether it is welfare or potholes. The debate that we never got into, because we were not invited and we were answering specific questions, the real issue that confronts us, is if you want to do more defence and security sooner, you will have to find the money from somewhere else if you do not want to tax or borrow more, and you will find that money probably in the supply and demand equation in the welfare state. Look at what has happened this week in Parliament. That was not a question for us, but it is a question for everybody.

Lord Soames of Fletching: Thank you, General. Dr Hill, do you have any thoughts on that?

Dr Fiona Hill: Yes. I will pick up, Lord Soames, where General Barrons left off. We can see how difficult that was in the NATO context. Countries like Hungary have said, "We are doing what we are doing and we will absolutely not do any more."

Spain, of course, refused to increase GDP spending in part because it has a different threat assessment, getting back to that difference in perception between north and south that we talked about earlier and Spain not being able to conceive of the idea of coming under direct Russian attack. They have a lot of concerns about their critical national

infrastructure, of course, after that major blackout that they experienced a while back, but they are not seeing the same kinds of threats as they would in Poland, the Baltic States or Finland, for example.

I would like to touch on that point about Finland and Sweden and Norway, which are, of course, our partners in the Joint Expeditionary Force, because they also have a different approach, which might gel into a combination of both the hard and soft power, if we define it in a larger context. We talked about the 1.5% in the NATO agreement that would be applied—and it was quite vague—to critical national infrastructure and all kinds of hardening of our economies and polities and also society. The Finns, the Swedes and the Norwegians already engage in this. The Finns and the Swedes quite recently looked at how they can harden their societies. It might be worth members of this committee looking at that because it gets right to that point of resilience that we talked about in the SDR but could not, because of the constraints, range out onto all the different ways that this touches. They have looked at how they can harden their societies. There is a new report coming out all the time in Sweden and in Finland both about how they bring their private sectors into their national security realm, key parts of legislation that they institute, and of course how they have preparedness embedded in the curricula at schools and also regular training for societies.

This is all possible because, of course, they are small polities as well. We are talking about 5 million-plus people, depending on which of the Nordic countries we are talking about, but we could do these kinds of things on a regional level in the United Kingdom or they could be done in the United States on a regional level. They talk about the defence of society, not just the defence of the state, and that is an important element. NATO in those deliberations did not get into that in any detail and that will be the next step.

That is where, as Lord Robertson said, the national security strategy would take off in the United Kingdom because there are so many reviews. There is a Soft Power Council. There is a commission for foreign affairs. The Foreign Office is set up as well. All kinds of reviews all came together at the same time. Now is the time, after all that stocktaking, to figure out how the United Kingdom would best position itself, along with the allies but on the home front as well, which, of course, was important during World War II and the Cold War, but, as the Finns and the Swedes and the Norwegians would say, needs to be done now.

Of course, the Finns never did stop putting in place the defence of society and politics. They had a whole-of-society approach to their defence that they continued even after 1989 when everybody else moved away from that. We have a lot that we could look at to other countries and could be done in a Joint Expeditionary Force format, for example, not just NATO writ large.

The Chair: Lord Bruce, did you have a supplementary?

Q7 **Lord Bruce of Bennachie:** Thank you very much. It was exactly on

that. I am speaking to you from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, which is meeting in Porto, and it is focused on Ukraine and on the Middle East. Interestingly, Donald Trump's big, beautiful Bill has meant that the US delegation has not turned up, which is, of course, a concern, as you might imagine.

The point I wanted to pick up—and you took all this evidence, as you say, from members of the public—is how your report can help UK public opinion recognise the scale of the threat and the justification for this. You have already hinted at a lot of resistance. I find—and Lord Robertson will probably appreciate this—that the Scottish Government say they support NATO and they support the Government's increase in defence but they will not provide any support for anything in Scotland that leads to the manufacture of armaments, in spite of the fact that we are building frigates and all kinds of other stuff. When a Government within the UK is taking that attitude, how on earth will public opinion be moved to the point where people say, "We get the threat: we understand we may have to pay more taxes or we have to do something about welfare", but would you agree that the public does not seem to be there?

Secondly, does your review have enough in it, if we use it properly, to help that process? It seems to me you have done a lot of detail. If we can get it to the right people, maybe you can use this report to help change attitudes, if you feel you could. Maybe George would take that one.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The report makes it clear that there needs to be a national conversation about defence and security, and the Prime Minister has accepted that. Indeed, when he launched the report—and remember, he insisted that he would launch the report himself and lead on the issues concerned—he made it clear that that was a starting pistol on a debate that will involve the whole nation.

The *Times* newspaper said to me yesterday that a new opinion poll out shows that support in the UK for NATO has gone down by at least 10%, and support for NATO is least of all among the younger generation. We cannot afford to wait until the lights go out or the giant cyberattack melts the data centres before people ask what the Government will do about this to protect us.

The leadership needs to come. All of us—and we are all politicians around this table—have to lead that debate to make sure that people recognise that an insurance policy has to be paid. Defence expenditure is the premium on a national insurance policy to keep us safe. In a world where the threats are multiplying and the turbulence is manifesting itself all the time, that message needs to get over.

It will not be easy because other people have different priorities, as we saw in Parliament last night, but at the end of the day, it is the principal responsibility of the Government to keep their people safe. If they are to be kept safe, because we are not safe at the moment, more has to be done.

Q8 **The Chair:** General Sir Richard has said that what you have recommended can be afforded within what the Government have promised, but he also acknowledged what happened in the context of welfare spending this week. We have heard that part of the cost of the lease over Diego Garcia will come out of the defence budget. What are the consequences if the Government's ambition of spending 3% of GDP on hard defence during the next Parliament is not achieved?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We will not be as safe as we could be. It is as simple as that. We are not safe at the moment because we are under attack in the subthreshold area with cyberattacks, the use of chemical weapons on British soil, disinformation campaigns and all the rest of it. We have been able to see now graphically and in real time what is happening to the Ukrainians, who thought they were safe three and a half years ago. Therefore, in this country, if we do not spend the money, the country will not be safe. It is as simple and as blunt as that.

Mr Rutte came to London the week before last and put it in blunt terms. He said, "Either we spend 5% or we start learning Russian". That was a bit blunter than we have said in this report. He also said—and it is true—that we are all now eastern Europeans. We cannot pretend that, because there is a moat around this country, as in many ways we did in 1998 when I did the first review, we are somehow insulated from the problems. The problems are there. Long-range missiles can reach this country now from any other point in the world. Safety is absolutely essential.

The NATO countries last week decided that 3.5% was the minimum that is required for the NATO countries to spend on defence so that their people will be safe.

Q9 **Baroness Blackstone:** I do not want to dissent from your argument, George, but plenty of people will. You saw last night just one facet of that because plenty of people think about dealing with disabled people living in poverty or, as far as I am concerned, dealing with children living in poverty when a third of our child population is in that position, and will say spending 5% on defence has huge costs.

I want to know whether you looked at areas that you could deprioritise in a political situation where people are not prepared to go the whole hog and where your defence review takes us in terms of the percentage of our GDP spent on defence. There must be some areas we could say are not as important as others and, if we have to tighten our belts a bit, this is where we should go. What are they?

General Sir Richard Barrons: The most important place to start the answer to that question is to recognise the journey the Armed Forces have travelled since the end of the Cold War. From 1989 to the present day, there has been a process of consistent managed decline. Even inside the last year, the MoD got rid of a lot of stuff that was essentially redundant.

Our starting point was not a good one. We found that there was nowhere left to go because the structure was so reduced. Behind the structure, the things that people do not see so much of—stockpiles of ammunition, the supply of spares, the strength of the reserves, the amount of training that makes things tick—were at such a low ebb that we honestly could not find things they could do without that would make a material difference. We could, of course, say, "You must stop all public duties" but that is repaid into the economy tenfold, in fact, and so it was a specious argument.

Baroness Blackstone: Is it rather dangerous that people like you, who have a huge amount of expertise, are unable to identify some areas that are less important than others? If you do not, other people will do it for you and it may not be the result you want to get.

General Sir Richard Barrons: Yes, I acknowledge that. The second part of my answer is that, when we looked at the original financial profile we were given, in big handfuls, we were going to have to say, "Look, you are trying to do four big things with the defence budget, a nuclear deterrent and a first division—but small—army, navy and air force. For some years, you have been doing all four quite badly in a world where we were not dealing with the risks we are dealing with now. You cannot do four things badly now because it is a complete waste of money. You cannot do much with it. You can fight for a week, provided you do not take any casualties because you cannot deal with them."

Part of our job is to reset to deterrence based on the credible ability to fight. The programme that we arrived at allows you to do that over quite a long period of time for the amount of money we were given, which is up to 3% by 2034. If that money does not materialise, you will then not be having a discussion about what you could shave unless they are small and not material to these sums. You will have to come to a judgment about what big thing you no longer offer to NATO—discuss.

If you look at a 10-year defence programme, you will quickly find that there are big, existentially important things to defend, so you could not work out how you would ever afford them. When we confronted people with the reality of that, they realised that there was no way they were ever going down that road, but there is no place where you could go now to find big sums of money easily. We have done all that for 35 years.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We looked at all that. To emphasise the point, for example, some great commentators ask why we have two aircraft carriers. They are there; they exist. We now see them as hybrid airwings. The aircraft carriers would have planes, undersea drones and overhead drones on board, and would carry long-range missiles as well. They have a completely different role. To simply mothball them would add cost.

One feature of this report that has been noticed by many people is that we do not belabour the inheritance that we had. It seemed to us to be unproductive to do so. Over the years we have taken the peace dividend

and have reduced defence expenditure, so we are at the point where, when you look at what is happening in Ukraine today, we could not take the casualties. We do not have the equipment or the spare parts to allow us to fight an enemy like the Russians if they chose to invade today. We could not take the casualties. The week before last, the Russians had their millionth casualty from death and serious injury in the Donbas, but we do not have the military medical capability to take such a casualty list.

I say to people, like those I heard on television last night talking about disabled people, that there were disabled people in Bucha, Mariupol and eastern Ukraine who were worried about their disabilities before the Russians invaded. They are now living under a brutal, horrifying regime of occupation. Overnight, their circumstances changed and their disabilities became the least of the problems that they faced in the occupied territories. We need to bear that very much in mind.

Dr Fiona Hill: Could I add a different dimension to this? This is an important conversation that needs to be had at a national level, not just here in London but spread out across the country to put these things in perspective.

When we looked at the totality of defence, admittedly not in all the ways that members of the committee might have liked us to do because of the constraints in looking at the defence sector, we of course looked at defence medicine. We looked at education and training, equipment issues, transportation, accommodation, military housing, the military bases and all the other infrastructure that the defence sector has under its remit. We found all kinds of areas where cost savings and efficiencies could be brought in. We talked about divesting surplus infrastructure, not accommodation but bases and such like, which may be obsolete at this particular point.

However, as Lord Robertson has just said, when you look at the medical aspect of this, it requires fixing the National Health Service because defence medicine is an integrated part of the National Health Service. What disturbed us in looking at this is that the United Kingdom is not set up for a mass casualty event, irrespective of where that mass casualty event comes from. We saw heroic efforts on the part of the NHS during Covid, but we are talking about having all our critical national infrastructure being taken out all at once. The vulnerabilities are there.

Let us think about, for example, the debates about winter fuel payments. One pipeline from Norway carries 70% of UK gas. What if that pipeline is ruptured? We have not thought about all that, have we? If that pipeline is ruptured, the only company that can repair that pipeline is not a British company but the Norwegian company, Equinor. A lot of our other critical infrastructure falls into that. If we think about a mass casualty event that could ensue from any kind of avenue, irrespective of an attack by Russia or any other adversary, we then need to think about the systems that we have in place.

A handful of countries can handle mass casualty events. The Norwegians, the Swedes and the Finns can—they are small polities—and the Germans can. They have been doing do behind the scenes in Ukraine, by the way, stepping up and helping the Ukrainians, because they have restructured their health service and looked to put it on a regional level, not just a national level.

Implicit in the report is a lot of challenges for other debates in the United Kingdom about how to fix different parts of the system within that rubric of defence. We can use defence and the Strategic Defence Review as an impetus or as a frame for thinking about these issues. We talked about skills, education and training. We talked about STEM. We talked about having a strategic reserve, which General Barrons might want to talk about, that does not just cover people who are ready for military action, but people who would be capable of stepping up in the event of a mass casualty event or in the face of any other disaster or challenge. All of us here would be part of a strategic reserve based on our skills. That gets back to what I mentioned before about the Finns, the Swedes and the Norwegians, who already have that whole-of-society approach.

There might be ways of getting at the things that we are all concerned about through the frame of increasing our resilience and our ability to withstand threats, again under that insurance premium. Something that came up in all our citizens' assembly meetings was the importance of being prepared and better insured and not wanting to be underinsured—you do not just take out an insurance policy, you also take precautions to try to avert what you are insuring yourself against.

Anyway, there are different ways of looking at this and this committee will be able to take that forward.

The Chair: Richard, do you want to pick up that point about a strategic reserve?

General Sir Richard Barrons: Yes, I will. When people think about the Armed Forces over the past 30 years, they have in mind campaigns like Iraq and Afghanistan, which were much the responsibility of the uniformed regular Armed Forces. Essentially, defence was outsourced to them.

In an era of state confrontation and conflict, we have to rethink how the Armed Forces can regain mass and endure over years as we have seen, for example, in Ukraine. You cannot do that and there is no point trying to do that with a regular Army, Navy and Air Force alone. It is too expensive and you do not need them every day.

In the review we focused on the imperative to rekindle the reserves. The first element of that are those people who have been in the Armed Forces and left quite recently, within six years. They have a liability in law, but we found that nobody knew where they were. Relatively simply, they can be reconnected and the obligation they have made can be refreshed.

Then the volunteer reserve can perform a number of important functions. Some of that is about giving access to skills that you cannot afford or do not need every day, some of it is about making the Armed Forces bigger, and some of it is about making the Armed Forces endure. The new element of that for us was thinking about homeland resilience and so we have talked about the creation of a new, lighter-touch local reserve for critical national infrastructure protection. I very much regret that it was immediately christened as the "home guard" because it is not that.

We need to think about defence people as a combination of as few regulars as you really need, a healthy reserve, the use of civil servants and Crown servants, which is profoundly important, and access to industry for capability that only industry has. That all became very important.

The second dimension, which is just as important, is that we generally define armies, navies, and air forces as ships, tanks and aircraft, but what we prescribe is a transformation into a crude, uncrude and autonomous mix. That mix will require a different manpower recipe. In the future—not now—it may be that you will ameliorate the number of people you need in the Army, Navy or Air Force because you have more machines. That will be more effective, it will take people out of harm's way and it will be cheaper because robots do not need hospitals, pensions, quarters or time off.

Q10 **Lord Houghton of Richmond:** There has been a bit of a mini blizzard of reviews and reports, which have either just come out or are about to come out. Your Strategic Defence Review, the National Security Strategy, the defence modernisation programme and, imminently, the Defence Industrial Strategy. In a general sense, do you think that these have all been conceived by one controlling and directed mind? I ask this because the Secretary of State writes in the foreword of the SDR that there is an acceptance that the defence programme of change recognises that the SDR and defence reform rely on each other for mutually reinforcing success. I must say, if I dare, that the cynic in me sniffs alchemy here again. To what extent could you illustrate those linkages, and say which you think the vital ones are, so that a programme of modernising headquarters—that is one significant element of it—and all the capability recommendations and big themes critically hang together?

General Sir Richard Barrons: I will start on that. It should be absolutely clear that the delivery of the SDR requires two of its siblings to function well. One is defence reform and the other is the articulation of the outcome of the SDR into programmatic detail through the defence investment plan, which will not be a public document. That is essentially taking what we all agreed—the 62 recommendations and all the narrative—and putting it into the 10-year programme.

If we start with defence reform, there are a number of constituent parts whereby, if they do not work, nothing will succeed. The first of those relates to the financial settlement given to us in February—a very pivotal month—in which there was also the creation of the Defence Oversight

Board, which is the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Defence Secretary. That has been created to make sure that all this money is spent as intended. It delivers the very highest level of political oversight of their SDR. That means that our understanding is that the Government are engaged in delivering the SDR at the highest possible level. That is a very good thing.

The second level relates to four entities that are within the Ministry of Defence. The first is the Department of State under the Permanent Secretary, with a reinvigorated policy function. The second is the Military Strategic Headquarters under the CDS; the CDS now commands the service chiefs, and you will recognise how profound that is. The third element is the national armaments director, soon to be appointed we hope, as the leader of the entirely new industrial partnership, which the review sets out. That is at least as important as the creation of the Military Strategic Headquarters. The fourth is the Defence Nuclear Organisation, which accounts for 20% of the defence budget. The four senior individuals will be the senior official leadership of defence. They have to do their job because, if they do not, almost nothing else will function. You have a new industrial partnership and a complete refreshing of the bureaucracy not just in acquisition but in infrastructure, innovation and personnel administration.

The Defence Industrial Strategy must articulate the SDR outcomes in the detail that allows the Armed Forces and industry to see how things will be done, and done differently. I am pretty confident that the MoD is well placed to write that plan, but it must be held to account to deliver it. If the Defence Oversight Board walks away, if the gang of four at the top spend the whole time squabbling among each other—which I think is very unlikely—if the MSHQ does not function and if the industrial partnership is not made to work, the SDR will be stillborn. I would say this is hard, but not that hard. People use the fact that it is hard as an excuse to try not to want to do it. My view is it is not discretionary and they need to be made to do it and be held to account. Then we are in a good place.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The Defence Secretary was giving evidence this morning, I think, to the House of Commons Select Committee. I am pretty sure that he will have emphasised his own personal determination to make sure that what Richard has said will work, that all the different component parts and the SDR will all be implemented, and that there is a single-minded determination by him to deliver a better system and to make the country much safer than it is now. His drive and enthusiasm will be absolutely imperative. He has got a bunch of junior Ministers who are themselves excellent and chosen for their quality too. I have absolutely no doubt that that determination will feed through and will lead to a success here.

Q11 **Lord Darroch of Kew:** General Barrons, I have heard you speak before on the importance of the defence industrial partnership. I think that, potentially, it sounds great, but my question to you is, practically, what will it mean? What I am driving at here is: what should we look for in

terms of structures or processes or events or announcements that will tell us that this is working?

General Sir Richard Barrons: There are a couple of important things. The first is that in the review, in partnership with defence reform, the national armaments director, for the first time, owns innovation, acquisition, digital acquisition, logistic support and infrastructure. That may not sound that novel but, previously, they all operated in slightly different ways where there were seams between them. The national armaments director has the means to deliver a coherent, whole-of-life solution. What might that mean? The first thing is that we will no longer have the Ministry of Defence spending some years writing down in great detail to the nearest rivet what it is it wants from industry, with industry then receiving that, understanding that it was outmoded and a bit mad, but then spending some years competing against it. Currently, for any project valued at more than about £20 million, we go from "I have an idea" to "Here is a contract for six and a half years" in a world where that should be, even for a big thing, for six months.

With defence reform, we have introduced a completely different approach to how the Armed Forces are attached to innovation, particularly commercial innovation, with acquisition running on the basis of outcomes, not specifications. Industry will be asked, "We have got this much money and we want this kind of effect; what can you do?", not "We want this thing, how expensive can you make it?" That is a completely different change and requires quite a lot from current employees in the acquisition world and industry.

Now, I must say, industry was telling us that it need to go down this road and the City was telling us, "We are really interested in how we attach private money to things like infrastructure", so we felt we were pushing at an open door. With the imminent appointment of the NAD, his or her ownership of that combination of things, the success in constantly evolving the Armed Forces—we have talked about the digital targeting network and the crude, uncrude and autonomous mix—at the speed of innovation, which mostly comes from the commercial sector, we will see quite quickly whether that works.

The third thing is that never again will people say, "I have bought this aeroplane but I forgot to ask for hangars or training—more money please." That will never happen again. There are some quite simple metrics here.

Q12 **Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie:** Thank you very much for all your work. This was a unique process where you were external reviewers but you have produced a government document. General Sir Richard, you have been talking about outcomes; in my world, outcomes are everything. There are delivery deadlines in this review, but there are no outcomes, so there are no benchmarks or milestones. I would like you to speak about what these should be. That leads on to who ensures that success happens? You have both said that this matters and that we need to do this because we are not safe and we need to keep safe—so we have

to do this. When the Australians did this, they had an external implementation panel to ensure that what their 2023 review said actually happened. Do you have any informal or formal role to ensure that implementation happens? If you do not, who does?

General Sir Richard Barrons: In the review's 62 recommendations, there are some quite sporty timelines around specific things such as the digital targeting network and initial capability—I think it is end of 2026, early 2027. We use those as a forcing function because we know they can be done. The technology already exists, so get on with it. There are some cases where we might have wanted to put more deadlines but the Government shied away from it because there is a bill attached and they were not sure when they wanted to meet that bill. The defence investment plan will answer some of those questions, but it will not be a public-facing document.

How will we know that we are succeeding? It will be, first, when we, our allies and our opponents recognise that the UK is playing a better part in day-to-day deterrence. Deterrence is not a contingency; it is a daily thing. It is not as precise as a P&L outcome but you kind of know when you see it. We will know it is working when that industrial partnership functions, because industry and the City will say so and our allies will want to emulate it. That is probably two to three years away.

The way I hope we never know that this works is if we end up going to war, because deterrence has failed, and we win, because that actually is the end of this. I may have said this before, but we end up having this tortuous discussion about 3% or 3.5% of GDP for defence to preserve deterrence when we know that, if deterrence fails, it is somewhere between a quarter and a half of GDP—plus death, plus destruction. You need to look at this whole thing as an investment proposition, of a no-brainer proportion.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I asked the Defence Secretary what he would say today to the Commons committee and he said, "The reviewers did a huge job in leading our SDR and, while their formal role has ended, I am keeping them briefed on the action we are already taking to implement their review recommendations, and I will continue to welcome their views on this." That is the formal position.

The great advantage of an external review is that you can get views, boldness and radical solutions from that, which can be adopted by the Government. The downside is that we are now insiders and we know where the bodies are buried. We are watching and will continue to watch. I know this is offensive for Fiona, but we are the four crows sitting on a branch, watching carefully what is going on in the Ministry of Defence, and we will be there. There are also committees of this House, this committee and the House of Commons Committee that will also be watching carefully what is going on in that sphere, and I know that Ministers in the department are well aware of the fact that they have exposed themselves through the SDR as a government document and they will be held to account on it.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Dr Hill, do you have anything to add on that? The other thing that has struck me from the conversation today is how much of this is reliant on outside the normal defence structures, in terms of monitoring implementation and what changes. Can you expand on how we can scrutinise the implementation process?

Dr Fiona Hill: I think this is exactly as has been said. This is in your prerogative as this committee, and also in that of the House of Commons committee. I think it is essential that Parliament plays a role here writ large. That is exactly how the UK democracy functions.

I think, however, that there is also a public dimension to this; we have talked about it, but we have not thought about how it might play out in this regard. We would be remiss if we did not take the temperature of the public. A unique thing about this Strategic Defence Review was the creation of the citizens' assemblies. Perhaps we did it a little late in the process, as it was quite difficult to get off the ground—you can imagine that there was a bit of consternation about this when we first suggested it. We took members of the public—fairly randomly selected—to a series of army, navy and air force bases and also to one of our key communication sites. We asked them what they thought about defence beforehand and what they thought afterwards, and we also backed that up with some strategic polling.

That is where the idea of the UK being underinsured came from, with people wanting to see more insurance. The question of the premium was a different matter. It of course became clear, as we would all expect, that people were a bit reluctant to be spending more, but they saw the point. We could have more follow up with people—a random selection of people across the country in key areas—which is something that regional authorities could do. We now have a lot of devolution, with combined authorities in places like the north-east, Greater Manchester and so on, so there could be a lot of local government participation in this.

What was also extremely interesting from these assemblies was how people responded to their visits to the bases. They were extraordinarily committed to the idea of the people who served there. I do not quite know what we were expecting, but there was less interest in the equipment; they wanted to make sure that people were well equipped, but they were not obsessing about what particular armaments the Army should have, or the future of aircraft carriers, or what types of planes, Typhoons or F35s, the Air Force should have, for example. They wanted to know that we were committed to our Armed Forces personnel, and there was a great desire to reconnect. We know of course that those connections were attenuated, for good reason, going back into the 1980s and 1990s after the IRA embarked on assassinations and terrorist attacks on the British mainland, especially targeted against the UK Armed Forces, but we are in a different phase now and I think that we could have more engagement with the public. Members of Parliament could do that in their town halls and constituency meetings to see how the public are reacting to all this. That could be a key element of this.

Obviously, a dialogue across the country can take many forms; we already see that in the media. Universities, for example, could play a role. It is also important to think about moving beyond Westminster and London to have debates about all this. Places such as the Royal United Services Institute, RUSI, which is right next door to here, will certainly be paying very close attention, as will the IISS and Chatham House. You can be sure that there will also be scrutiny from those sources in civil society and civic institutions about what is going on.

Q13 **Baroness Blackstone:** My question relates to the one I asked before. If the strategic priorities were to change dramatically—which is perfectly possible in the kind of volatile world in which we live—are there any mechanisms in place to allow this review and its implementation to be adapted and modified in the light of those differences in priorities?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Well, the Government own the report, so we have already seen that the Government are taking decisions based on the report in terms of equipment. We did not recommend munition factories but, at the launch, the Government said that they would build them. They have taken some of the conclusions and have gone beyond them; they will obviously want to do that. I think that—as Richard will emphasise—we have created a structure that can be expanded and advanced quicker, depending on circumstances. It is not a static report; it is a strategic defence review that is looking towards 2035 and the process that will be required to get there in order to reshape all our defences in that context.

The culture in the Ministry of Defence, and the risk averseness that has led over the years to overinsulation of processes, is something that has to be tackled and is clearly one of the objectives that we have laid out. It is perfectly feasible to use the structure that we have proposed in different ways, if that is determined by the external circumstances and the availability of money. These are the two factors that would have a dramatic effect on it, but it would not require you to go back to square one to look at the whole review again—it is there.

Baroness Blackstone: I was not implying that, or did not mean to if I sounded as if I was. It is much more that there obviously needs to be some flexibility in the long-term approach that is taken following your review, so it can be adapted where it needs to be. What you are saying is that flexibility is present in the mechanisms that you have set up and in the leadership tier that you described earlier.

General Sir Richard Barrons: We were clear from the outset of the review that all previous reviews had stumbled within two years because they failed to predict how the world actually turned out; 9/11 and so on is an example. One way that we have assured against that—and it is not perfect—is we have not set out a future force structure. We have said, "This is what NATO is asking of us, and this is the sort of thing we should do. This is the capability transformation path that we will go down, with digital targeting web and the crude, uncrude, autonomous mix." We have not said what that is. We are pretty confident that this pathway is better

than what anybody else anywhere in the world has currently. Our problem is how to get on with it with not quite enough money.

What I believe will happen is that—probably on the outcome of what happens in Ukraine and where the US administration goes next—events caused by our opponents or our allies are likely to require us to go quicker. That will cause the demand for more money sooner. It will sharpen the debate. From my own perspective—I have been asked this question a lot—there is not much more that the three of us can do. We are not invited to a continuing role; that has been made clear. There is not much more we can do as self-appointed SDR vigilantes for very long. This is a function for the Government and Parliament.

Q14 **The Chair:** Thank you all so much. I will finish by asking how, having gone through this process, you assess the strength and limitations of this rather innovative process of the external reviewer model as a mechanism for shaping government policy? What aspects worked particularly well and what were the challenges, if any, that constrained your role or your impact?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: It was quite an exercise, and much longer and tougher than I think most of us had anticipated. We created 25 working groups based on the questions that we put out, which this committee and others answered. Eventually, we had over 30 of these working groups, made up of anything from six to 10 experts—that is the volume of the chairs' out notes from each of these working groups, and they were told to keep it brief. It was thorough, it was honest, and I believe that it threw up a lot of the issues that we knew about as well as other ones, and it brought out innovation as well.

It is more a question for the Ministers as to whether they were satisfied with it. I think we have produced a good report that the Government accepted, the Prime Minister himself said he accepted the report and all the recommendations, and that the funding would be found for the recommendations. That, in a way, is a vote of confidence for the quality of our work.

It has been unique in terms of having a secretariat inside the department and, therefore, accessible to the department and to all of the information that is available, right up to the highest level of classification. Yet that also gave us the opportunity of being radical and bold and to insert our own views into the ultimate report. In that respect, it was different to the Australian model, where they did the report, handed it over to the Government and the Government then took some time to look at it and work out how it should be implemented. Ours was done with the department, not to the department, and yet we could be fresh and original in the thought processes.

The amount of work that was involved was much harder than most of us had anticipated—maybe not Richard, but some of us ordinary folk found that pretty hard going. At the end of the day, though, we produced a

report that seems to have been widely welcomed and that I think is good, but I will let my fellow reviewers express a view.

Dr Fiona Hill: I think that making sure that, if you are thinking about something like this again, you have the broadest range of expertise possible; that is key. Sometimes we had problems being able to engage people in the discussions. Most of this was done on a pro bono basis and a lot of people who could have provided input on a more regular basis than just perhaps for the working groups were, by necessity, pretty busy people with all their commitments. Sometimes they were not able to do something because of conflicts of interest, for example, so that was a bit of a challenge.

Getting out information to the public at large is obviously somewhat constrained. It was put out through regular government channels and we tried to spread the word ourselves, but it did not always meet people where they were at and we got a few complaints towards the end of the submission process—which was at the end of the summer into September—that people had not heard about it until the deadline was up. It was not because we had not publicised it, it was simply that they had not heard about it.

We therefore started to think about those challenges of trying to reach the largest possible audience. That was one reason why we also tried to put together the citizens' assemblies, but then there had to be all the debate about how to structure those. They worked well in the end, but it was a basically a fire alarm, rushing around trying to get all of these done.

The advantage of having the three of us was that none of us was looking for a job. It is important to have reviewers who are not campaigning for their next position—or campaigning for anything in particular at all. Richard has a job that he has to carry out, and I have a job and other things as well. From my vantage point, having someone like me, with the expertise that I brought was, I hope, beneficial. However, it was not so great having me over in the United States and, to be honest, I found it quite stressful having to come over at short notice, particularly in the end period when the politics took over across Whitehall. I had no idea what was going on, but I could not come and hang out in a hotel somewhere for an endless, indeterminate period of time, while people decided whether they would release the report or not. Those end phases became a little frustrating for all of us because, ultimately, it was the Government's to own and it depended on schedules for the Prime Minister and many others as well.

I do think that choosing people from very different backgrounds with different perspectives was key. I was super impressed, I must say, by the professionalism of the people in the secretariat. It gave me a lot of hope that there are a lot of good people within the Civil Service who are very mission oriented, and there are obviously some fantastic people within the Armed Services and across the Government. That is something that

people can be proud of. I was impressed by that sense of mission, that dedication and the amount of hard work that people put into it.

The report is of course the pinnacle of all of this because, as George said, there was masses of material that was generated that the Ministry of Defence was able to look at. The drafting of the report was pretty critical as well, and getting a good drafter was key. In this case, we had Ashlee Godwin, who works within the parliamentary sector, and another team of people. They were excellent and that is key. That is obviously not the easiest thing to do, because George had to do a lot of cajoling, and Richard as well, to get that team in place. It is always the easiest thing.

General Sir Richard Barrons: There are some lessons that can be carried forward to other reviews outside defence. The thing that made the three of us effective, however, was that it was not our first rodeo—we know what we are talking about—and we were only accountable to the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary. We were working with their authority. As Fiona has described, we have no dog in the fight—although I actually do need a job—and so we were able to go where we wanted to go, insist, assert, challenge and get co-operation at the highest level. That was important.

The second thing is, when we did that, we had a narrative from the outset, so we knew where this was going to go in big handfuls and we were testing that. The lesson to never launch a review unless you know what the outcome is was restated here, I think. That narrative guided how we constructed the 25 or so propositions in ways that tested it, and the propositions deliberately overlapped each other. We got 8,000 submissions and nobody knew how they would all come together. That was a good, intellectually rigorous exercise. On the review and challenge process, the good news was that we drew in about 140 expert people selected to do it; the bad news was that getting there was a shock to the MoD's bureaucracy. We relied on the phenomenal good will of people to do—basically for nothing or buttons—stuff that they could normally do as part of their living. I am still getting a hard time from people because I asked them for an afternoon and I got three weeks' help for nothing.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Well, we were lied to, so we lied to other people.

General Sir Richard Barrons: On things that we should have done differently, we should have started the drafting as soon as we got going and not half-way through, and the drafters went through five iterations. The thing improved constantly. They hit every deadline, but they were doing 20-hour days on some occasions—so we ought to try to avoid that, if someone does this in the future. There were two things that we were never going to get past: one is that this is a government report. We were reporting to the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary. The Government have issued it as their work, so they obviously would put their hand on the outcome and on the announcement. In the announcement process—if it had been left to me—there would have been

more Christmas tree and fewer baubles, because I would have been communicating with a specialist audience, I think.

The flaw at the end of it was the same as the flaw on the day we started, which was "Please could we look at defence and say what needs to be done for the world that we live in to transform it, and then say what you get for this money over time". There was always going to be a gap between those two outcomes—there is a gap between those two outcomes. What we have ended up with is affordable, but people will still say "11 out of 10 for narrative, but it starts too late, goes too slowly and takes too long for the world we live in". We will go faster if you can find more money.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Other Ministers in the Government should be looking carefully at this model. I think a lot of other departments would benefit from the kind of review that we have done. We are not volunteering to do this any other department, but I think the concept was a good one and if people think that the review was a quality product it may well be that other government departments could follow John Healey's example.

The Chair: Thank you all so much for sparing an hour and a half or whatever we have taken of your time. We are extremely grateful and it is very helpful.