

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

Oral evidence: National security machinery

Monday 1 March 2021

4 pm

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Members present: Margaret Beckett (The Chair); Lord Brennan; Tobias Ellwood; Richard Graham; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Baroness Henig; Baroness Hodgson of Abinger; Darren Jones; Lord King of Bridgwater; Lord Laming; Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho; Sir Edward Leigh; Angus Brendan MacNeil; Sir Robert Neill; Baroness Neville-Jones; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Bob Stewart; Lord Strasburger; Tom Tugendhat.

Evidence Session No. 1

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 1 - 28

Witnesses

[I](#): Rt Hon David Cameron, former Prime Minister.

[II](#): Lord Ricketts, former National Security Adviser.

Examination of witness

David Cameron.

Q1 **The Chair:** Mr Cameron and Lord Ricketts, thank you very much for coming to give evidence again to this committee. Perhaps I can briefly give you a little background, with which you may be familiar.

In a previous Parliament, the committee began an inquiry into the issue of biosecurity, which morphed into one on the national security aspects of handling biosecurity. That led us to using the arrival of the pandemic as a case study for the handling of tier 1 national security risks. The pursuit of that inquiry has led us to the inquiry in which you are the first witnesses to give evidence on the national security machinery. There are no better people to give evidence than the two of you.

As I recall, Mr Cameron, when Gordon Brown published the first national security strategy and set up a committee, you welcomed it as Leader of the Opposition, but you said then that you thought it ought to be a

National Security Council with, I think, a National Security Adviser. Would you like to tell the committee what led you to that view?

David Cameron: Thank you very much for having me; it is very good to see so many familiar faces and friends. There were two things that led me to think that it was necessary. One was an immediate issue and one was a longer-term thing.

The immediate issue was that when I became Prime Minister we were fighting a war in Afghanistan, and I felt that we needed a National Security Council that met not just weekly but perhaps even more than weekly to deal with the issues in a whole-government way. We had the Defence Secretary, the International Development Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister all sitting round the table and trying to drive action, where it was needed, on Afghanistan.

The second, and longer-term, thing was looking at all the issues, whether it was immigration, Afghanistan, Syria or our relationship with China. These were issues where you wanted two things: you wanted strong prime ministerial leadership, and you also wanted a whole-government approach—you wanted the key Ministers around the table. I thought it would help us prosecute matters better in Afghanistan in the short term. I thought that long term it would lead to us looking at national security issues in the round, with the Prime Minister clearly in the chair. That is why we set it up.

The point of having a National Security Adviser is that it is the national security element of the Cabinet Secretary job. They are there to report to the Prime Minister, to organise that part of the Cabinet Office, to agree the agenda with the Prime Minister for what the National Security Council is going to talk about and then to deliver on that agenda and act as the National Security Council's and the Prime Minister's personal diplomat, as it were, for dealing with security services around the world, Governments around the world and other national security advisers around the world. It had that key role as well.

I was delighted to set it up. Peter Ricketts did a very good job in making it work, first off, and I am glad that it has survived and seems to be being used properly.

The Chair: As you will find, very many members of the committee want to contribute this afternoon, so I go straight to Lord King.

Q2 **Lord King of Bridgwater:** It is very good to see you, Mr Cameron. I congratulate you on having set up the council. How do you think it worked, looking back?

David Cameron: I think it worked well in a number of ways. In prime ministerial time and effort, having a dedicated National Security Council that you chair as Prime Minister means that you are very focused on national security issues, both foreign and domestic. You have the right people round the table. You know that bit of the Cabinet Office is working very directly to that agenda. It helped us to look at issues from both the

domestic and the foreign side. With things like Afghanistan, which was a foreign policy challenge, a security challenge and a fighting terrorism challenge, it is obviously necessary to have the key people around the table.

I was very fortunate in having some excellent National Security Advisers who not only marshalled the arguments and marshalled the committee work well but were very effective diplomats in their own right. I used to joke with President Obama. He used to say, "Let's leave this to Ricketts Donilon". That was Peter Ricketts and Tom Donilon. I think there were moments when he actually thought that Peter Ricketts and Tom Donilon were one person, when it was the British National Security Adviser and the American National Security Adviser working together.

We obviously made mistakes, and I am sure we can talk about those, but the exercise of having a part of the Cabinet Office dedicated to the subject, with a weekly meeting chaired by the Prime Minister, was a good thing. I think it made us handle the issues better. It was flexible enough that you could create sub-committees, as we did for instance with the Libya conflict. You could have a sub-committee of the National Security Council, where you could keep on top of what was happening and try to drive action.

I am a great believer that it is not enough for Prime Ministers just to set up a committee and make a decision. You need a long screwdriver. You have to keep pushing the machine in the direction you want it to go. The NSC helped to make that happen.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Comparing it to my time, we had the Cold War. The world was a much more stable and much safer place. It seemed to me that what came out with the National Security Council was a number of issues. You had Afghanistan, Syria, Isis/Daesh, Libya, Iraq and all the problems there, Yemen and various other issues that blew up. It tended to get dominated by individual military activities.

It leads me to this question, which obviously you are going to be asked. Did you lose sight of one or two of the strategic issues? How well prepared was it on the pandemic field if it was so busy with individual military activities?

David Cameron: It is a very good question. The National Security Adviser would come and see me once or twice a week. We would sit down, almost on our own, and talk about what we wanted to discuss at the forthcoming meetings. All the time, we were very conscious of wanting to discuss the big strategic questions: Britain's relationship with China, the opportunities in our relationship with India, and what effect climate change would have on the national security picture.

You are right that, of course, with a weekly meeting, when you have as many foreign policy issues to deal with as I had—you enumerated them all—that tended to get pushed aside, but if you look at the range of meetings we had, I think you will find that we had big strategic

discussions on China, India and our relationship with Africa, and the committee can find the evidence for that. Obviously, there were big strategic discussions on defence reviews and the national security strategy.

By virtue of the fact of having a National Security Council, we had proper discussions about the biggest risks facing the country, and the risk assessment. For instance, we made pandemics a tier 1 risk, which was important because that means they get more government attention. As well as that, we set up a sub-committee on threats, hazards and risks that looked specifically at things like pandemics.

Inevitably in government, you are always pushed into looking at the immediate rather than the strategic. It is a permanent battle to try to bring yourself back to the strategic.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Although it was made a tier 1 issue, one got the feeling, for the reasons you have very fairly given, that there was not much attention at the very top.

David Cameron: I do not think that is fair, and I will tell you why. We had a reminder of what a pandemic is when Ebola struck. The global architecture of the World Health Organization was quite slow to respond. I think the UK can be pretty proud that, along with the United States and France, the national security architecture steamed in, and we met and talked about Ebola. We also did it through COBRA. The work that the UK did with Sierra Leone meant that we were bringing together the health department, the military, aid and foreign policy to help deal with the outbreak. That reminded us of the dangers of pandemics.

I think the mistake made was that, in thinking about future pandemics, the focus was very much on influenza rather than on respiratory diseases. I am sure there will be a big inquiry into what we learned and all the rest. There was a pretty good flu pandemic plan, but it was a flu plan rather than a respiratory diseases plan.

We set up a unit in the Cabinet Office to do global virus surveillance. I am not quite sure what happened to that unit after I left, but it was there when I was there. You are right that more should have been learned from the experience with SARS and the respiratory diseases for our own preparedness, but I would not blame the national security architecture for that. The architecture was there.

Q3 **Sir Edward Leigh:** Thank you for coming to talk to us on our committee, David. We are very grateful. I want to ask a devil advocate's question. You mentioned President Obama. Of course, there has been a National Security Adviser for a long time in American history. It is a presidential system.

The Labour Party set this ball rolling with setting up the Joint Intelligence Committee before 2010. I am sure that the National Security Council has done nothing wrong, and there is no particular reason to doubt it, but how much difference has it actually made? After all, before 2010 we had

an excellent structure for our security services run in the traditional way. We had the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister.

I know it is a great soundbite and that it gave a bit of oomph to the incoming Conservative Government that we were going to really care about national security, but, at the end of the day, has it actually made a great deal of difference?

David Cameron: I would say yes. If you take, say, Afghanistan, you are talking about what the right defence deployment is. You are talking about how we stop the flow of drugs by using our Home Office expertise, how we encourage development by using our aid budget, and how we ensure good foreign relations using our diplomatic service. It makes sense to have those people around the table and make decisions in that forum.

One of the problems with being Prime Minister is that often you have a discussion and a decision is made, but there is no follow-through. The National Security Council meant that there was an arm of the Cabinet Office to follow through on the decisions that were made.

Problem number one of being Prime Minister is making decisions and making sure that they are followed through. The National Security Council helped with that.

The other problem, frankly, with being Prime Minister is that No. 10 is quite small. Many of the departments are very big and powerful and are often a bit of a law unto themselves. I once joked that as Prime Minister you spend a lot of time trying to find out what the Government are up to and then quite a lot of time trying to stop it.

When issues are discussed in the National Security Council, you are able to drive action on them. Our response on things like Afghanistan, or to the humanitarian situation in Syria or to Ebola, was faster and more joined up. We did not have delays where the Ministry of Defence would say, "We've got the ships to deliver the aid", but the aid Minister would say, "We're not going to give you the money to pay for them". You could bang heads together and get things done there and then.

I would say that it is better for co-ordination, better for action and better for decision-making. Having a National Security Adviser means that you have that link, Prime Minister to Prime Minister, when perhaps talking with Manmohan Singh about the problems of terrorism in India. You have that link Prime Minister to President with Obama when you are talking about how to try to rescue hostages on the other side of the world. That was hugely helpful.

There are lots of former Cabinet Ministers listening to this, and it will be interesting to see whether you agree. I liked having meetings where the key people were there, and you could have an argument and a discussion. One of the strengths of the National Security Council is that you have the head of MI5, the head of the Secret Intelligence Service,

the head of GCHQ and the head of the Armed Forces sitting round the table. You can really interrogate them about what they think and whether they agree with the strategy or not. Do they agree with each other or not? It is important to have those people in the room when you are making decisions. I am sorry that was a long answer.

There is one other example. Britain being able to have its own drone capability was very much driven through the National Security Council. That would have taken for ever if we had not had that structure. There would have been endless ministerial meetings and discussions, first between the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, and then between the lawyers. If you have a National Security Council where everyone is in the room, you can get on and make decisions faster, and I think that is a good thing.

Q4 **Bob Stewart:** David, the national security structure and the national security adviser set-up is your baby.

David Cameron: It is almost a teenager now.

Bob Stewart: True.

David Cameron: It is having its 21st birthday. It has come of age.

Bob Stewart: You talk about strong prime ministerial leadership and the structure. Do you think the effectiveness of the national security structure depends on the Prime Minister to a large extent?

David Cameron: It depends on the Prime Minister recognising that these are important issues, and this is an important forum to thrash them out and get things done. If you were to ignore it and just see it as a rubber stamp or a bit of an obligation, it would lose some of its importance. It needs prime ministerial engagement.

For instance, I think it was a very bad mistake combining Cabinet Secretary and National Security Adviser. They are two jobs. One person, even a cross of Einstein, Wittgenstein and Mother Teresa, could not possibly do both jobs. I think that temporarily weakened the National Security Council. You need a good National Security Adviser. Britain has lots of incredible top diplomats, senior military figures and others. I am delighted that Stephen Lovegrove from the Ministry of Defence is to be the National Security Adviser. That will bring a new perspective. We have great people to do that job, but you need a Prime Minister who wants to use that machinery and a National Security Adviser who feels bold and muscular enough to be a potential diplomat as well as a bureaucrat.

If you have those things, why would you not use them, as Prime Minister? Part of the problem as a Prime Minister is, "How do I manage to co-ordinate departments in search of the same goal?" Almost all foreign policy goals involve aid, diplomacy, military capabilities, intelligence and thinking about putting those things together.

I am getting on my hobby horses, but I think that abolishing DfID was a mistake for all sorts of reasons, one of which is that having the Foreign Office voice and the DfID voice round the table is important. They are not necessarily the same thing. We need the deep development expertise about what we could do to help with the humanitarian situation in Syria or help development in Afghanistan. Can you really expect the Foreign Secretary to be able to do all the diplomatic stuff and speak to the development brief as well? It is quite a task. It is good to have both. Maybe they will have both; I have not kept up completely. Maybe there will be a development person at the NSC. In my view, it should have one.

Q5 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** Good afternoon, David. Since you were Prime Minister, the NSC has had rather variable fortunes in how regularly it has met. There have been periods when it has not met frequently. When I was advising you on this subject, one of the things I thought about, but did not put to you, was making the NSC a statutory body. In the light of what has happened subsequent to your own premiership, do you think that is something that we ought to do, or do you think we should leave it as, in effect, a Cabinet committee?

David Cameron: First of all, it is very good to see you. I was just the midwife; you were the author of the National Security Council in the papers that you wrote for me when I was in opposition. Thank you very much for that and for all your service.

On the whole, I am not in favour of putting these things on a statutory basis. I do not quite see the point.

Baroness Neville-Jones: I happen to agree.

David Cameron: You would probably just add to complications, and all sorts of litigation could come into it. Different Prime Ministers will want to work in different ways, and I totally respect that. I think that, over time, Prime Ministers will get drawn towards the National Security Council approach, because the longer you do the job, the more you see the need to try to drive progress on issues where you have the key voices around the table.

Obviously, Brexit was an enormous national endeavour that took a lot of time away from other issues, and there was the mistake of having one person who was National Security Adviser and Cabinet Secretary. Now, with a new National Security Adviser, I would be pretty confident that Boris Johnson will use that to drive the big issues. We have big decisions to make on the relationship with China and what we do post-DfID in all the relationships with Africa and how we deal with future pandemics. It is hard to think of a better forum for the Prime Minister to use to receive all the information, make the decisions and get things done. I do not think a statutory basis would work.

Baroness Neville-Jones: The definition of national security has broadened, even since you were Prime Minister. It is very closely related to the national prosperity agenda these days. A lot of the things we worry

about are things like technology being stolen. We have a broader ambit.

David Cameron: There is a danger that you end up arguing that everything is linked to everything else, so everybody has to discuss everything. Eventually you have to come up with a demarcation line. I think you are right that national security should include all those threats and hazards, from pandemics to space weather, to the effects of climate change, to internet security and the dangers of mass internet outages. If you remember, Oliver Letwin was particularly effective in the Cabinet Office in trying to make sure that we were doing the proper work on those. I accept that it has got broader in those terms. I think committees like yours are asking the Government, "Okay, you have been talking about this or that foreign policy challenge, but have you also been looking at the threats that you face?" That is all to the good.

I would not spread it too wide, because arguably you could have another approach and say that, when it comes to the prosperity agenda, why not have a National Security Council-style approach? The Prime Minister faces the same challenges. You want to build houses, so you talk to the Housing Minister and then you find that the Treasury has blocked it. again, you need to keep people round the table.

I had a very close relationship with my Chancellor. We made sure that those things did not happen, but the case for basically trying to make the Cabinet Office work more directly for the Prime Minister in something like an economic security or economic prosperity committee—rather as we have the National Security Council—would not be a bad idea. That would stop the National Security Council from going too wide, as I think you were hinting.

Q6 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** It has been a while, Mr Cameron. I wonder if you miss the old job at all.

David Cameron: I certainly do not miss Wednesdays at 12 noon. It is a bit different these days, from what I can see.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I miss exercising the old vocal chords in your direction, but moving swiftly onwards, it seems that you were quite involved with the NSC and its meetings. Did you routinely chair them? Did you think it was important to do so?

David Cameron: Yes, I routinely chaired them. I think it is important. The danger with all committee meetings is that people talk and talk, and do not come to a conclusion. Sometimes you should have a broad discussion about strategy or a complicated issue. Sometimes you are dealing with something that you do not know a huge amount about, and you need to learn; it could be the problems in Yemen or something like that. But often you are trying to reach a set of conclusions about what the Government ought to do. If that is the aim, the Prime Minister needs to chair it, otherwise there is a danger of very interesting discussion but no conclusion.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: When you were doing that job, you were

doing it against the backdrop of being in a coalition Government. Do you think that restrained you, or maybe even freed you? What was the dynamic that was different with having a coalition rather than not having a coalition?

David Cameron: I think the coalition partners welcomed the fact that we had a National Security Council because it meant that they knew they were not going to be left out of important discussions about, say, Iran, Iraq or Isis that might have real consequences.

Nick Clegg, Danny Alexander and the Energy Secretary all sat on the National Security Council. That was all to the good, because they knew they were not being left out of something important. I would argue that, even without a coalition, Governments are still coalitions of different Ministers and ministries, with sometimes different interests, and the NSC is a way of bringing them together.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Of course, that was in the days of the quad, when government was quite big, and before Dominic Cummings took charge, of course. You started off with weekly meetings. Was that about the right tempo?

David Cameron: I think so, if you think of the foreign policy challenges you have at any one time. Today, you would be talking about what was happening in Sudan. There is a lot that should be done in the Horn of Africa. You would be talking about Yemen and Saudi Arabia. You would be having discussions about what is happening in Burma. You would be having discussions about how to work with the new American leadership. I do not know whether the post-Brexit situation comes into the NSC or somewhere else, but there is a whole set of things to talk about, as well as thinking about long-term issues and challenges. If you do not meet weekly, they stack up, so I think that is about the right tempo.

As I said, when it came to Libya, when we were in a conflict situation, I set up a sub-committee.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

David Cameron: That was the NSC (L). Peter can probably give you the figures, but I think it met 80 times.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: It was a sub-committee. I know we are going to get other details of sub-committees, but specifically on Libya, and with the benefit of hindsight, do you think it was a mistake that there was a sub-committee, or was the intention much the same?

David Cameron: The sub-committee does not mean it is less important. It was a sub-committee, but almost all the time chaired by me. The choice was not between having a sub-committee or the full committee. It was between having a sub-committee or not having one and having ad hoc updates. The problem with that is that, if you set the strategy and say to the military, the intelligence chiefs and all the rest, "Okay, we've set the strategy. Off you go", you slightly lose control of what is

happening. Many of these questions have very important political and strategic consequences. We had to work hard to make it a NATO operation and make the NATO machinery work. There was the whole question about what to do with the oil sanctions on Libya and how to make them work. There were even questions about what to do with the Libyan currency that was being printed in the UK but potentially sent to Libya.

I am rambling on about this, but the point I am making is that you needed the Chancellor of the Exchequer. You needed the Energy Secretary. You needed other people around the table so that you could deal not with day-to-day decision-making about how the conflict was pursued but with making sure that you were asking all the questions, covering all the bases and doing everything you could to try to pursue it to a successful conclusion. If you just did it ad hoc, I think the Prime Minister would lose control, would not get the information and you would lose that vital co-ordination.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Thank you. Donald Trump fancies a comeback at some point? Does it ever cross your mind?

David Cameron: No.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Thank you.

David Cameron: Thinking about Donald Trump making a comeback is enough to keep us all spinning over. I am happy doing what I am doing for Alzheimer's and dementia. I spend a lot of time on that. Something that came out of the National Security Council is the work we were doing to try to focus the aid budget on the most fragile states. I am continuing that. I have set up the Council on State Fragility with the former President of Liberia and the former Finance Minister of Rwanda.

The truth is that, over time, India and China will lift their own poor out of poverty, but we are going to be left with the Somalias, the Burundis, the Sierra Leones—the countries that are deeply troubled and conflict-ridden—which will cause not only lots of poverty but lots of problems for the rest of the world. That is a classic example where the National Security Council needs to sit down and think, "Okay, what we have been doing to help these countries up until now hasn't been working. There's clearly stuff we need to do on debt forgiveness—that is the Chancellor. There are things we need to do on aid—that is DfID. There is our relationship with them—that is the Foreign Office. There's the question of immigration—that is the Home Office. Let's sit down and work out how we help the most fragile countries, because if we don't we are not going to meet any of the SDGs and we'll also have problems of piracy, immigration, mass movement of people, terrorism, et cetera".

That is a classic example of where you need a whole-government approach. That is what the NSC delivers.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Good luck with that, and thank you.

Q7 **Darren Jones:** Mr Cameron, I am interested in the distinction between the National Security Council having an oversight of all the national security concerns versus the time and capacity to build a grand strategy for Britain's role in the world and its direction of travel. Where did that grand strategy conversation happen? Was it a 10-minute item on the agenda? Did you have away days, or was it just happening in No. 10?

David Cameron: That is something I was asked about a lot the last time I came to this committee. I think the grand strategy is something that parties think about in opposition before they come into government. Of course, you can refresh it and think more about it, but as regards what you are trying to achieve about Britain's place in the world, the balance between foreign and domestic policy and what you see Britain trying to do, the strategy is set out before you get to office. If you start trying to think about it and do it while you are in office, you will get overtaken by events.

In the Government I led, we made a strategic decision to focus on fixing the economic problems, the deficit, the indebtedness and all of that. That was a very big part of it, and lots of other things followed. Inasmuch as there is a chance to sit and think about Britain's strategic role and position in the world while you are in office, the National Security Council is not a bad place to do it. There are not so many people in the room that it is like a UN General Assembly, but you have the key people with the key expertise who can contribute to the discussion.

Darren Jones: Thank you. It has been suggested that there are some modern examples of what some call a failure of grand strategy. There is the pandemic preparedness, which we have already talked about a bit, as well as the calling of the Brexit referendum. With hindsight, would you agree with that conclusion?

David Cameron: The Brexit referendum was discussed and called in 2013, two years before the general election and three years before the referendum itself. It is not as if it was suddenly thought up and popped into a manifesto. People might disagree and say it was a bad idea or whatever, but it was properly thought through, discussed, argued, debated, voted on in Parliament and put in a manifesto. A Government was formed on the basis of that manifesto. Sometimes when I read about it, it is as if people think it was an afterthought. As I say, I think it was in January 2013 when the announcement to hold a referendum before the halfway point of the next Parliament was made. Unlike some policies, it was not popped into a manifesto at the last minute. It was a good two years before the election.

Darren Jones: So it was part of your grand strategy.

David Cameron: Yes. I thought we needed to confront the issue, because I could see—I have written about this extensively in my book—that, partly, the single currency had fundamentally changed the EU. That change was happening in front of our eyes. We had to confront the issue of how to try to find a better place for Britain within the EU, which is what

I think my negotiation achieved, or to take a different path. It required a referendum to do that.

You can disagree with that argument, but it was an argument that was properly had among senior Ministers. It was announced, discussed, debated and voted on in Parliament. I think it received an overwhelming majority from MPs from all manner of parties. It was put in a manifesto. A Government was elected on it and we carried it out. Like the great democracy we are, when a decision is made it is then implemented.

Of course, I wish the result had gone the other way. I think there was a path for Britain to stay in on an amended basis, but I disagree with people who say that there was not a problem. There really was a problem, and I was confronted with it quite early in my premiership over the issue of bailing out eurozone countries, for instance. Britain is not part of the euro. We should not have been asked to bail out eurozone countries. Problems like that were coming back and coming back, and that is the issue. The development of the single currency changed the nature of the organisation that we were a member of, and we needed to find a better and more certain position within the EU or to take a different path.

Darren Jones: Thank you. I will have to pick up a copy of your book to read more about it.

The Chair: I call Lord Reid. Lord Reid, you are mute.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The problem of our time.

Q8 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** Thank you for your responses, David. Having criticised a former Defence Secretary for pressing the wrong button, I have just done exactly the same thing.

David Cameron: Easily done.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: For what it is worth, I think you were absolutely right to establish the National Security Council. Indeed, it was years overdue and should have been done by the Government I was a member of. As Baroness Neville-Jones knows, some of us argued strongly for that, not least because to have an Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism that brought all of the elements together and then to have no higher body did not make sense. It stopped half way.

However, in the light of the experience of the past decade or so in dealing with this, I do feel that there is at least an argument for some degree of independent assessment outside, maybe in two ways. The first is that, as you said, the NSC is capable of immediate operational decision-making and, to some extent, blue-skies strategic thinking, but it is really difficult in an interconnected world where issues change by the day. Yes, you can decide before you go into government, but if a week was a long time in politics 50 years ago, by God it is seconds now, with the changes that go on in the world. Therefore, some form of external body that can look at strategic issues might be a useful complement.

The second area, more briefly, is the issue of risk. Risk now is not single risk; everything is interconnected, as you said. Government benefits from the Office for National Statistics, the National Audit Office, the Office for Budget Responsibility and so on—independent bodies that can feed in data and assessments. Do you think there is a case for one of those to supplement the National Security Council?

David Cameron: I think those are very good points. You are certainly right that government needs not just to be held accountable but to have its eyes opened to what others are saying about threats, risks, hazards and the rest of it. Obviously, we have that in the UK. There are lots of good think tanks—the International Institute for Strategic Studies and others—that often say, “The Government’s national security strategy isn’t thinking about this or thinking about that”. If what you are asking is whether there should be a more formal mechanism for the Government to say, “Here’s our national security strategy. Come and critique it and let’s have a forum in which other experts can do that”, that does not seem to me a bad idea at all.

I tried to do this a bit, but perhaps could have done it more. I think there is a role for getting independent experts into the National Security Council to give advice. When we discussed Nigeria, I got the Archbishop of Canterbury in. He had spent a lot of time in Nigeria, some of it involuntary; I think he was taken hostage at one moment. Getting independent experts in, particularly on very tricky subjects where UK expertise is not necessarily that great, is a very good idea.

On your second point, I am not quite sure. I think I agree with it. We tried to have a national security risk assessment, which Peter Ricketts can talk about in more detail, where a bunch of experts in the Cabinet Office would draw up the risks and try to tabulate them. We then had a discussion in the National Security Council: “Was pandemic tier 1 or tier 2? Was climate change tier 1 or tier 2? Where did a dirty bomb fit in?” We went through all the arguments. Are you asking whether there should be an independent body that tries to do that? Is that what you are hinting at, John?

Lord Reid of Cardowan: It is, and it arises from my own overview of the experiences of the past 20 years. Back in 2002, during the fuel protests, there was the first real study on paper on the resilience of the British economy. It warned that the greatest threat to the British way of life over the coming period was an international financial crisis. Six years later, nobody had done anything about that.

Similarly, tier 1, top risk, for a long period during Conservative Governments, was a pandemic, but, as you said, it was mistakenly regarded only as flu. On both of those occasions, we should have had an independent body giving advice, such as the Office for National Statistics, the OBR or whatever, without political interference. Once it goes to politicians, they can ignore it. To get that degree of independence would be a marvellous supplement to the National Security Council.

David Cameron: I have a lot of sympathy for that, but I would add one thing in defence of the politicians. Sometimes what you found, looking at the risks, was that civil servants were very good at enumerating them, setting them out and getting them in the right order, but often not very much followed. To get things to follow, I tended to have very strong Ministers in the Cabinet Office. I had Francis Maude and Oliver Letwin, very senior Ministers, driving change and action on those fronts.

To take, for instance, the fuel strike, we had a similar situation, and it really did take a Minister to get stuck right into the detail. How long does it take to train an Army driver? How many are there of them? How long would it take to get them into the fuel depots to get the fuel out? As I say, you need a long screwdriver in politics. You do not just leave it to officialdom to sort out problems because you have put something at the top of a list. You have to get right into the detail about what is going to happen next. Having a Cabinet Minister who is responsible for resilience and preparedness, together perhaps with your idea about a more independent assessment, would go some way to help, otherwise things are agreed to be a big threat, but not much happens.

Q9 **Tom Tugendhat:** David, it is very good of you to come back to the Commons like this, and maybe in the future to the Lords. I was very interested to hear what you were saying about strategy. You will not be at all surprised when you remember that my former boss, and still friend and mentor, General Richards, used to talk all the time about strategy, but I am a bit surprised to hear you talking about strategy as the job of opposition and not government.

Perhaps I could push you on that. If you look, for example, at decisions taken today to halve spending on Yemen while at the same time talking about China's influence in the UN, surely thinking about a strategic approach is exactly what the National Security Council should be doing.

David Cameron: I might have misled you. I do not think strategy is a job for opposition. As you are putting together your team and your manifesto, you need to think a lot about where you see Britain's place in the world and what the grand strategy for the country is before you even walk through the door. Once you have walked through the door, it does not mean that you stop thinking about it. What you are talking about when you mention strategy is having a strategic approach rather than a tactical approach when you look at the big issues that confront you, and that is exactly what the National Security Council enables you to do. You do not stop thinking strategically. I was trying to say that you should not be starting from first principles asking what Britain's place in the world is after you have got into office. You should have worked that one out already.

Tom Tugendhat: I think we agree with that. General Richards would certainly say that you keep going from there on out, as I am sure you remember.

David Cameron: He used to say, "Amateurs talk tactics and professionals talk logistics". That was his other one. I always used to say, "Yes, that's why we needed the sub-committee of the NSC to deal with Libya". I want the Prime Minister to know what the logistical challenges are, because if you do not know what they are, the decision-making you are engaged in, quite apart from the strategy you set, is meaningless. I am afraid you have to get stuck into the detailed stuff as well.

Tom Tugendhat: I am glad he had as much of an impression on you as he did on me.

May I push you further on the strategy? Do you feel that the current National Security Council is giving the same sort of strategic outlook? We are waiting at the moment, as you know, for the integrated review, which is due out, apparently, any week now. What are you seeing about the National Security Council in an overarching strategy that includes everything from the points that Lord Reid raised, such as pandemic preparedness, all the way through to the change in the relationship with China since your day?

David Cameron: I do not have any special access or information. I read the stuff in the newspapers rather than being able to have direct access to it. In defence of the Government, they have had the enormous challenges of delivering Brexit, and Brexit was an all-consuming issue for our politics for two to three years, and then the immense challenge of the pandemic. The former Prime Ministers talk to each other from time to time, and we would all say that we had difficult decisions to make and difficult circumstances to face, but nothing like this. It has been the greatest difficulty a Government have had to face for 40 or 50 years.

To be fair to the Government, they have had those twin challenges to deal with. As we vaccinate and come out of the pandemic, and as the Brexit situation, hopefully, settles down with our relationship on the outside, there will be an opportunity to use the National Security Council better, with the new National Security Adviser arriving, and to ask what the big choices are which the UK wants to make.

You and I might totally disagree when it comes to the relationship with China, but that is exactly the sort of discussion the NSC should be having now that Brexit is finished. What will our relationship with China be like? How do you take advantage of the rise of India? What will be Britain's role in aid and development with the, I think, mistaken decision about DfID and the 0.7%. That is what the NSC is for. I am sure it will come back into its own now that we can see our way through those twin challenges.

Tom Tugendhat: Given its importance, can you not see the argument therefore to make the National Security Adviser a Minister or certainly a politician? Having an official there will give you very good technical advice, and I certainly do not question the capability of the new appointee, Stephen Lovegrove, or indeed any of the former appointees all the way back to Peter Ricketts, but do you not see the benefit in having a

political appointee?

David Cameron: I do not, actually. The great thing about the National Security Adviser position is that you do not have to have an FCO diplomat. You can have someone coming out of the military. You can have a former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence. You can have someone from outside government altogether. You could bring in someone who is an expert in strategy.

The problem with having another politician is that you want the National Security Adviser to be your right-hand person advising and helping you. You want them working absolutely full time running that part of the Cabinet Office, and you want them to be the person who can get out to Afghanistan and meet the President and the National Security Adviser, and do the same in India, Pakistan and America. Even with your healthy majority, politicians will find that very hard to do.

Tom Tugendhat: There are Members of the House of Lords.

David Cameron: What?

Tom Tugendhat: There are Members of the House of Lords who do not have quite the same political requirements.

David Cameron: Yes, of course, but even they might have some rather closer votes than you guys. Who knows? I think there is an advantage. You do not need to be a politician to do the job. Your equivalents in, for instance, the United States are appointed civil servants. That is an absolutely crucial relationship.

It is not necessary. If you wanted to, you could. With politicians, you also have a constituency, you have the House of Commons or you have the House of Lords. Being National Security Adviser is 120% of a job. That is why I thought it was such a mistake to have it combined with the Cabinet Secretary, but we are over that now.

Tom Tugendhat: Forgive me, but the focus has been very much on the kind of policies that you direct. In terms of strategic outlook, David Richards would bring me back to, "Where are you trying to go?", and constantly bring me back to those kinds of conversations. Would it therefore not be wise to have somebody who is a special adviser, as it were, or somebody more linked to the Prime Minister's own viewpoints, and, if you do not want a politician, at least somebody who can reflect the Prime Minister's own strategic outlook?

David Cameron: That is a fair point. It would be good to talk to Peter Ricketts, who is a brilliant diplomat. I chose him not just because he was a brilliant diplomat. I thought that if you are trying to get a new organisation working, and you really need the Foreign Office to buy into it and make it work rather than trying to kill it, who better than the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office and such a respected diplomat? He immediately had not just that position but the gravitas and

knowledge to be a success internationally. Other national security advisers wanted to meet him. That matters.

As you choose subsequent people, you can think about their outlook as well as their expertise. That is not a problem. As I said, if you wanted to choose a politician or an ex-politician, or someone from the private sector, you absolutely could. There is nothing preventing you doing that, but, if you wanted to make it a rule or a semi-rule that it had to be a serving politician, I think that would be a mistake.

Q10 Richard Graham: David, it is very nice to see you on this committee. When you were Prime Minister, the NSC was spending a lot of time on some of the crucial foreign affairs issues that you raised—the Middle East, the near East, north Africa and so on. To what extent, when you were setting the agenda, were you thinking about the domestic implications of some of the international security issues?

David Cameron: A lot. That was one of the vital things. Syria and Iraq, the campaign against ISIS, Afghanistan, and all the work we tried to do in helping to mend Somalia were all issues to do with countries that were half a world away, but the consequences would be felt right back at home, with questions about whether something would lead to more radicalisation at home or less, the effects on migration flows, and all the rest of it. That is why the Home Secretary has to be there. Crucially, it was very good having the head of MI5 giving direct advice on what they thought about it.

There is a great habit among British civil servants to get together and try to agree a common position and then tell the Minister the common position. I always liked to try to get them to argue between themselves a bit. They obviously did not always agree, but it was quite interesting to find out what the different emphases were. That is essential. In all those issues, it was vital to get the domestic consequences right.

Richard Graham: Was the NSC surprised at all by any consequences of international actions that had not been foreseen? Did any trends emerge?

David Cameron: It was not surprise. So many of the choices you are making are not between a wonderful outcome and a terrible outcome; they are between a bunch of bad outcomes where you try to pick the least worst. When, for instance, we were dealing with the issue of Syria and what we could do to try to help the situation, of course we were thinking about the consequences back at home, but the argument there would flow both ways. If we had been even less interventionist than we were, there is a strong argument that it could have had worse domestic radicalisation consequences.

Lots of things surprise me, but there is nothing particularly surprising in trying to make sure that you look to the domestic aspect of international affairs.

Richard Graham: You highlighted earlier the fact that the UK-China relationship is a very important one for the NSC to look at, perhaps even

more so now than when you were Prime Minister. My memory of the time around 2010 to 2016 was that part of the drive for the strategic partnership was about drawing in capital for infrastructure needs in the UK. To what extent can the NSC balance that sort of economic need on the one hand with the difference in values that our two countries have on the other, while also thinking about bigger-picture co-operation on everything from the environment to international threats?

David Cameron: It is the proper place to have the argument. There was an argument, because there were different people around the table arguing for different things. Some were keener on prioritising the economic partnership and driving that. Some were very concerned about the difference in values and issues of human rights. That debate was had. My view has always been that, if you want dialogue and discussion with China on human rights, driving economic partnership deepens the dialogue rather than threatens it. If you become a more important and more strategic partner, you are better able to have those conversations, as I did with President Xi.

People will argue about whether or not we made the right or wrong decisions, but the one thing I would challenge is that proper discussions were not held on, for instance, the issue over Huawei and involvement in UK infrastructure. The NSC is absolutely the right place to have that discussion. You might want, as we did, to set up separate bodies to look through the individual detail of individual issues, but that is the right place to hear the arguments and the expertise. The advice we had, for instance, over Huawei was very much in tune with what we then did.

Q11 **Sir Robert Neill:** It is good to see you again, David.

David Cameron: Hi, Bob.

Sir Robert Neill: Following Richard's comment about domestic considerations, how important did you regard having a means of being assured as to what the legal parameters were in both how you developed strategy—what constraints there might be, international or domestic law considerations—and what the solutions then should be? I know you had the Attorney throughout, if I remember, but what is there more broadly?

David Cameron: It is really important. Having the Attorney permanently there was a very good thing because you could then have a discussion about what you might want to do in Afghanistan or Syria or elsewhere, and turn to the Attorney and get ready advice. I actually went one step further. There are two little-known institutional changes that I made in Downing Street. As well as having access to the Chiefs of the Defence Staff, I appointed a military assistant. In most cases, it was a colonel, someone who had experience in the military. One was from the marines. A lot of them had Special Forces experience. That was incredibly helpful, because, as Prime Minister, you want advice on tap immediately right outside your office, someone you can talk with and think things through with all the time.

I did the same on the legal issue; I had a legal adviser right outside my office. When you were discussing what the agenda was going to be at the NSC or you were having a discussion about how things were going in Syria or Libya or elsewhere, you had a lawyer present. That is not a threat to the Attorney. It just recognises that No. 10 needs powering up, in those regards, with military and legal advice, and it is important to have them there on tap all the time.

Sir Robert Neill: It is part of putting it on a more formal basis. It is the same as having the NSC itself on a formal basis; you have a better line of accountability and, if you like [*Inaudible.*] as to what legal [*Inaudible.*] on positions.

David Cameron: When you say formal, does that mean we have to enumerate exactly?

Sir Robert Neill: I did not mean it like that.

David Cameron: Different Prime Ministers want it to be done in different ways. It would be pretty odd to have a National Security Council without them. Given that all Governments have an Attorney-General, it is a very natural case that they should be there, just as in the Cabinet.

Sir Robert Neill: Yes, I agree.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I am very conscious that we have theoretically run over your allotted time, Mr Cameron, or reached the end of it anyway, and conscious also that we have Lord Ricketts waiting to give evidence. It is rather up to you. Could you give us another five or 10 minutes?

David Cameron: Sure, I can do that.

The Chair: In that case, we will go to Lady Healy, please.

Q12 **Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:** Thank you, Mr Cameron. Can I return to the structures of the NSC? Why did you set up the NSC sub-committees, and what were the pros and cons compared with having traditional Cabinet committees? I had not realised that you chaired some of the sub-committees. Can you give a bit more detail?

David Cameron: There were two types of sub-committee. When you had a burning issue like Libya, you needed the NSC, effectively, to meet to talk about Libya a lot, so it made sense to have a sub-committee that did that, and—Peter will probably remember better than me—it might have had a slightly different membership in order to make it work. It normally met in the COBRA room, because that worked better.

Then there were the sub-committees where there were issues we knew needed work but did not think would necessarily get done at the NSC top level. That is why the hazards and threats sub-committee was set up. We knew that an awful lot of work needed to be done to get the issues in shape. That is by and large what happened.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Do you think it is a mistake that most of the sub-committees have now been replaced by Cabinet committees?

David Cameron: I am not sure there is a huge difference. I suppose the difference is that the NSC is a different bit of the Cabinet Office. It has the National Security Adviser, so it makes more sense. If you have a National Security Adviser, you know what is in your threats document. You know what is in your priorities document. Trying to keep that under the ambit of the NSC would make more sense.

The Chair: Lady Henig?

Baroness Henig: My question has been answered along the way, so in view of the time I will pass at this stage. Thank you very much.

The Chair: That is incredibly helpful.

Q13 **Lord Laming:** Mr Cameron, it is nice to meet you again. I was struck when reading the background papers that, in 2010 when the national security strategy was established, you said, "We need to build a much closer relationship between government, the private sector and the public when it comes to national security".

Looking back, I wonder whether the bridges were built outside government or not. It sounds very much as if it was mainly government machinery that was being established and operated, without involving the wider community.

David Cameron: That is a fair point in a way, because getting the NSC up and running was, to start with, about putting in place the building blocks of having a committee, who would be on it, which civil servants would service it, how the National Security Adviser worked and all the rest of it. However, we were discussing foreign policy issues and security issues, including thinking about their domestic consequences, so I would argue that we did some of what you are talking about. When it came to work on protecting the country against terrorism and terrorist threats, for instance, we were better informed because of the NSC's existence. If you are arguing that it should have had some more public-facing side to it, that was not something we thought about, but maybe we should.

Lord Laming: With that in mind, looking back, does the machinery that is in existence now have the capacity to involve the wider community, to involve external organisations, or is it primarily an organisation that fits well within government but not beyond government?

David Cameron: As I said earlier, it needs to make sure that it listens to other voices. When it comes to expertise on foreign policy situations or on complex pandemics and threats, there are a lot of people outside government who know a hell of a lot more than the people inside government. It is a good forum for that. The people who work in the national security secretariat—Peter will be able to talk to this—felt that

part of their job was to engage with outside experts and academics and advice and all the rest of it.

As for the public-facing part, the Government do that in other ways, in public discussions about security challenges and terrorist challenges, and issues to do with immigration. I am not sure that the National Security Council itself needs to do that, but the Ministers in it do.

Lord Laming: That is very helpful. You mentioned the pandemic. We have one now, and we are living through it. How well has the machinery involved the wider community, or is there still a gap between what happens in central government and what happens at local level?

David Cameron: That is a huge question. When we have lessons-learned exercises, as I am sure we will, there will be things that we can learn about, such as the balance between using the central architecture and relying more on local government, so I do not want to get into that now. There will be a time to learn those lessons.

Q14 **Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho:** My question is potentially broad. What might you have done differently in 2010, knowing what you know now from your experiences?

David Cameron: Lots of things.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: I do not mean your whole premiership.

David Cameron: In terms of the NSC? On that narrow issue, I would have made more use of outside voices and experts. Since leaving office, I have spent a lot of time with the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford, and with academics, looking at how we help fragile states and what the evidence tells us about what works and what does not. I would try to draw on the knowledge of people who have thought about these things deeply. I would also use the expertise in Britain's diaspora communities. We did a bit of that, but we should have done more. Those are two lessons off the top of my head.

Q15 **Lord Brennan:** With regard to sub-committees and Cabinet committees, in cases where there is a long-term policy commitment—the Middle East is an obvious area—how can we ensure under a national security committee system, whichever way it works, that short-term assessments do not produce a hotchpotch of long-term policies?

David Cameron: That is a very good question. It would be a mistake to think that the National Security Council owns permanently every important issue and every important relationship. If you take the Israel-Palestine question, there is expertise in the Foreign Office, and to an extent in DfID, that has been managing and understanding the issue under Governments of all colours for 30 to 40 years. It is important that we keep that expertise.

The job of the National Security Council is, from time to time, to take an issue, examine it, and ask, "What is our strategy and is it the correct

one?" Again, you have all the people around the table: "What is our aid contribution and is that working?", "What is our foreign policy work to try to bring an agreement and make it more likely?", "What military assistance can we give countries such as Lebanon that might help?" You bring the whole of government to the problem, but that does not mean that you give up the Government's long-term investment in understanding a relationship.

Q16 Lord King of Bridgwater: We have talked about bringing in outside knowledge. David, you had six years running the National Security Council. You have that knowledge and experience. When you look at the National Security Council now, with Ministers coming and going, a number of them with very little experience and background in the issues, how can you make your direct experience of the sorts of issues that keep coming round—a lot of them exactly like the ones you were dealing with—available more readily to the National Security Council?

David Cameron: Another reason for having the National Security Adviser not as a politician but as a full-time official is that they have time to engage with has-been ex-Prime Ministers who might still have a view about things.

A very good example right now is that there is a new Prime Minister in Sudan. That country has been deeply troubled. It has been on the terrorist list and it has massive problems of indebtedness, but there is a new Prime Minister who seems to have a sensible approach. That is a classic example where the Prime Minister will not have much time to think about it because he has so many other things on his plate, but he could have a bit of time with the national security secretariat and the National Security Adviser thinking about what we can do to help in Sudan and the relationship that Britain could build.

I am sure Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Theresa May, John Major and others would have the same view. There are areas of expertise where we are ready to help out, give advice and give thoughts. The National Security Adviser seems to be quite a good person to garner those as he or she sees fit.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr Cameron, and thank you for your courtesy in giving us a little extra time. There are, I am sorry to say, a few members of the committee who have not had a chance to join in, and they may want to follow up. May we write to you if there is anything they want to ask?

David Cameron: Of course, absolutely. Please feel free.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

David Cameron: Good luck with Peter Ricketts. I am sure he will not mind that he has had to listen to all that, and I hope he will give you a very good explanation of what we are on about. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Examination of witness

Lord Ricketts.

Q17 **The Chair:** Lord Ricketts, you heard Mr Cameron's evidence. Is there anything in particular that struck you that you would like to pick up on or follow up in a little more detail?

Lord Ricketts: You had a very eloquent presentation of the political leader's view of the value of the NSC and his purpose in setting it up. The best thing is to come straight to questions that you think I can help the committee on. I certainly recognise, from what he said, what was very much the mood of the time in 2010 when he set it up, and a lot of the things we struggled with over the two or three years when I was National Security Adviser.

Q18 **The Chair:** I want to ask you something specific about that role and then I will go to Lord Reid. When you had the role, as Mr Cameron explained, you were also a foreign policy adviser. Since then, there have been controversies about some of your successors, which Mr Cameron referred to in his evidence—what roles they had, what experience they had, and so on. What do you think are the critical components to doing that job successfully? I appreciate that a different Prime Minister may have nuances in wanting a different kind of role.

Lord Ricketts: Each Prime Minister will bring their own view of what the National Security Council does and how they use the National Security Adviser. The role has four chunks, and the central one is to be the secretary of the NSC, the organiser of the meetings. I do not like the term "Prime Minister's National Security Adviser", because you are the National Security Adviser, and each of the ministerial members of the committee should see you as an honest broker in designing the agenda, with a balanced diet of domestic and international, immediate and longer-term issues. Running the National Security Council structure as a neutral civil servant is important.

Secondly, you are the Prime Minister's closest adviser on foreign policy, defence and intelligence. You are the person who is right outside his door and whom he can talk to about all those things. Thirdly, there is an important international element, as David Cameron said. You travel with the Prime Minister. You are in a network of other national security advisers. Critically, you are the person who takes the 3 am call from the US National Security Adviser when something big is happening in the middle of the night.

Fourthly, you are the head of a significant Cabinet Office secretariat with, in my case, 200 or so people, and you have to lead and manage that organisation as well. However the role is done, each of those four elements will be part of it.

Q19 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** Lord Ricketts, Peter, you were unafraid to

present your views in a forthright and critical fashion. Can I ask you to apply that critical mind to your own time? You were the first National Security Adviser. Looking back, how effective were the national security structures introduced 10 years ago? What worked well? What worked less well? With the benefit of the only exact science known to humankind—hindsight—what would you have changed?

Lord Ricketts: What worked well is what David Cameron was saying. It became the place where all the key decisions on a range of issues—defence, foreign policy, homeland security, counterterrorism—were brought together. There was a group of Ministers who met every week and who became very fluent fairly quickly in that whole range of issues. The other major benefit was to bring the heads of the intelligence community to the table, not so that they have a say in the policy-making but to be there for Ministers to question, challenge, and interrogate, and answer a question that has always been there for British intelligence up to this point: where is the intelligent client for our output?

In the past, when their relationship with senior Ministers tended to be more at arm's length, they would put in their papers, the JIC papers would go into the red box on Friday night, and they would come out, perhaps with a tick on them, on Monday morning. In the NSC, they were right there, and Ministers could see them. They could see the reaction to their material, and it was a much more effective docking point for the intelligence community with the policy-making world. That was a real advantage.

We will come on to talk about this, but, looking back, the area it was most difficult to make the NSC good at was longer-term strategic thinking. We will no doubt develop that point. It is extremely hard for senior Ministers in the maelstrom of governing in the 24/7 era to make time for grand strategic thinking—the phrase somebody used. I agree that the NSC is the right place for it to be done. It is extremely difficult in the rough and tumble of events to make that happen. We should probably have thought more deeply about how to do it right from the outset.

Q20 Lord King of Bridgwater: You heard me make the point to David Cameron about everyone's experience. You had huge experience in setting this up and seeing it work. How can that best be brought to bear? It is a feature of Ministers that they have short experience and very short tenures of office. How best do you use those experiences when you are dealing with problems, many of which are pretty identical to the ones that people had to grapple with five or 10 years before?

Lord Ricketts: To be honest, we have always been bad at that. When senior politicians or senior civil servants leave and, as it were, go off the radar screen, they tend not to be involved and consulted and drawn on in the future.

It is a good idea. We should probably make more systematic use of the pool of experience that we have both among politicians and among

retired civil servants, and indeed military chiefs. I have a bit of a platform in that I am in the House of Lords and I can participate there, and so do former chiefs of staff. You point to a problem, or a shortcoming, in our system that has been there for a long time, which is that there is not really systematic use of the accumulated experience of the previous generation of people who occupied the top jobs.

Lord King of Bridgwater: To take up David's answer, there might be an argument for encouraging Stephen Lovegrove to set up an informal private grouping of people, so that he says, "We have this problem again. How did you deal with it last time? What were the snags that you hit?" What do you think about that as a recommendation?

Lord Ricketts: It would be a very good idea. I suspect that Stephen Lovegrove would be very sympathetic to that. The problem would then be to make sure it happened and that people found the time for it, and the advice that was given found its way into the policy-making debate. There is a lot to be said for that, and the same applies to former senior political leaders.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Absolutely.

Q21 **Sir Robert Neill:** It is good to see you again, Lord Ricketts. We heard the conversation about the balance between international and domestic considerations and where the emphasis should be. What is your take on how that might work going forward? Very often, the one would have a knock-on effect on the other. Are there lessons to be learned from your time on how we best get that balance right?

Lord Ricketts: Increasingly, the distinction is moot because things are both international and domestic. Terrorism or cyberattacks, for example, often originate outside the country, but they have domestic impacts. International crises immediately have domestic impacts as well. The pandemic began outside the UK but has had a massive domestic impact. Increasingly, it is an unreal distinction.

In the NSC, from the very start we had the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, the Secretary of State for International Development and the Home Secretary. We had a range of different Ministers, some dealing with international and some dealing with foreign. It is all joined up these days. I do not think that is a problem. It is up to the National Security Adviser to make sure that, as I said, there is a balanced diet of the different issues. The more difficult thing to get right is the balance between the short-term and immediate and the longer-term important but not yet urgent.

Sir Robert Neill: There will be legal parameters or constraints or opportunities or actions that need to be taken on both the international and the domestic threat risk register. I was interested in Mr Cameron's answers as to how he thought that had been resolved. From your point of view in the secretariat of the organisation, as well as the Attorney's presence on the committee, which we probably agree is important, what

is the best way to make sure that legal advice and understanding as to the constraints or otherwise from an international and domestic law perspective are embedded in the formulation of policy on these issues?

Lord Ricketts: It is partly the job of the departments and the national security secretariat to make sure that the advice that comes to Ministers has the legal dimension clearly flagged up, so that they are aware of legal issues and legal constraints in the work that comes to them. If there is an issue with a high degree of legal dimension, for example, the Justice Secretary can be invited. We did a lot of work post the Guantanamo Bay detainees on reform of the judicial system to allow special procedures in court for classified information. Ken Clarke, as Justice Secretary, attended the meetings of the NSC for that. You can bring in individuals like that, but it is vital that the advice that comes to the NSC already has legal advice in it.

Sir Robert Neill: Was the idea of the lawyer embedded in No. 10 that Mr Cameron talked about useful, in your experience?

Lord Ricketts: Yes, absolutely—the military and the legal advice. It is important for the Prime Minister not to have a huge staff but to have some subject expertise right on tap that he can get into his office in a minute, rather than waiting for somebody to come across from the Attorney-General's chambers.

Q22 **Baroness Hodgson of Abinger:** Good afternoon. We have heard about how, in David Cameron's Government, a number of sub-committees were set up particularly to deal with military operations such as those in Libya and Afghanistan. With hindsight, do you feel that was the right approach? How did those operate? Did they take decisions themselves or did they feed back to the main NSC? Would you do things slightly differently now?

The second part of my question, which we have already touched on slightly, is about strategic matters. As you said, in the maelstrom of events, it is very hard for the NSC to think about long-term strategic thinking. What would you do to change the architecture or to address it going forward?

Lord Ricketts: We set up a range of sub-committees when the NSC was established in 2010, on a range of different issues. One or two of them were never really used in a very operational way, but a couple of them proved very useful. We used the one on nuclear affairs, for example, to develop the treaty that we signed with the French at Lancaster House at the end of 2010 on the sharing of technology on virtual testing of nuclear warheads. That ran a specific project in a small, obviously highly classified group. Others were less successful.

The one that the Prime Minister referred to, the Libya sub-committee, was, as far as I remember, more or less the full NSC, perhaps with some added military advice and one or two members who did not go. It met very intensively. In my memory, it met 62 times in the five months when the Libya crisis was at its head—three times a week—and on the days it did not meet I tended to chair an officials-level meeting myself.

It was a very intensive crisis management mode of the NSC—a war Cabinet almost. It drew loud complaints from Whitehall that they could not deal with one commission before the next commission arrived on their desks, but it reflected the absolute need for Ministers to be across the tactical detail in a conflict situation, when a tactical event on the battlefield, given 24/7 media and fake news, can become a major issue on the front pages of the press the following morning, or indeed within the hour. That was inevitable. That was the NSC in hot crisis management mode.

I would like to develop further your point about strategy when we have the opportunity. It is difficult for senior Ministers to find the time and the political energy, frankly, to stop doing the immediate crisis work with which their lives are so full and to leave behind what is happening right now today, which needs rebuttal in the media, which needs a parliamentary statement, which needs urgent action, and think about things that may happen but may not, and are important but not so urgent. The structural answer that I tried to deliver was to set up what we called the NSC officials meeting, which was the Permanent Secretaries of each of the departments on the NSC—very experienced civil servants—mirroring the make-up of the NSC, and with potentially a little more time than senior Ministers have. We would go away and have away-afternoons or evenings and think in a more structured way about China, for example—the security community of Whitehall debating with the economic community of Whitehall about how to handle the China issue. That is a partial answer.

Then you need to make sure that your strategic advice is interesting and challenging enough for Ministers to pick it up and read it, and to make sure that it delivers through into some sort of action by senior policymakers. That is not always a given. I think it is more likely to be at that level that you can do longer-term strategic thinking than in the melee of day-to-day politics.

The Chair: Mr Tugendhat, that leads perfectly to your question.

Q23 **Tom Tugendhat:** Lord Ricketts, it is a pleasure to see you. I am very interested to hear your perspective on long-term thinking and the way you tried to add to it by creating the officials group, which I remember from sitting in the cheap seats at the back when my principal attended. Did you ever think of studying the national strategies of other countries that were attempting to do that and seeing how it would affect the UK?

Lord Ricketts: We looked particularly at the American example. The American National Security Council is much bigger, with 500 or 600 people, but I had the same complaints from US national security advisers about how difficult it was, even in that large structure, not so much to find people who could think strategically but to engage strategic thinking in the day-to-day policy-making work.

I do not think it is so much a question of size—we looked at that—but more a matter of making the longer-term strategic issues sufficiently

sharp, challenging and demanding of ministerial attention that they get that attention, because there is always something more urgent on the desk of a Prime Minister or a Defence Secretary than thinking about what has been called grand strategy and where the country may be going in years to come, as opposed to dealing with the disruptive threats that are on their desks now.

I did not identify another large country that had found a way of solving that problem. Smaller countries such as Singapore, especially when they have Prime Ministers in charge for decades, have been better at thinking in grand strategic terms than a large modern democracy.

Tom Tugendhat: I think many of our Prime Ministers would like to hang on for decades, too—

Lord Ricketts: They might.

Tom Tugendhat: But it is not entirely a bad thing that they do not. Understanding US grand strategy, and France's and Singapore's, in order to co-operate is clearly important. Did you also study the strategic output of China, Russia or any other country to see how they were seeking to interact with us, which was sometimes not altogether conducive to the public good?

Lord Ricketts: No. Of course, those regimes are very secretive about what their real grand strategy is in the world. If they published national security strategies, which I do not think they do, they would be documents of polemic and ideology, rather than any real guide to what they were doing, but certainly following what was happening in Russia and China was important.

Looking back, one of the problems of national security policy in Britain and elsewhere is that the field has become so wide over the decades since the end of the Cold War, as you discussed with David Cameron, with the addition of all sorts of issues—environmental, human security, cyber, terrorism; a constantly expanding universe of national security—that it can be difficult in all that to pick out the deep trends that will shape the country's future in a decade or two.

The growth of China and the growth of broader-gauge threat from China probably did not get enough attention in the national security structure until the last three or four years. It was dominated largely by counterterrorism and, before that, by the interventionist wars of choice of the first 12 years of the century, so some of the longer-term underlying threats were not given the attention they deserved. That comes back to the problem of finding the time and attention for things that are not staring you in the face but are happening under the surface.

Tom Tugendhat: Clearly, those will be challenges for any Government, and this Government have their own urgent issues, just as they did in your time. When the integrated review comes out, which we are told will be in a few weeks' time, what will you be looking for? Will you be looking

for two, three or four key themes that underpin the security and defence of the nation, or will you be looking for wide-ranging policy ideas that could perhaps satisfy rather more questions?

Lord Ricketts: I would be looking primarily for clear choices about where the country is going. The risk in those sorts of documents—I oversaw one myself in 2010—is that choice is always difficult, and it is easier to keep all your options open and set out a long list of ambitions, aspirations and intentions to have Britain doing everything everywhere, because that is easier than being clearer about where Britain will prioritise and where it will do less. By and large, I have found that, for perfectly understandable reasons, senior political leaders are reluctant to make choices like that; they much prefer to present a picture of Britain being a first-rate global power everywhere, not just in the Euro-Atlantic area but in the Indo-Pacific, across all the different threats and risks facing the country.

The problem with that is that spreading so thinly is not a good basis for resource prioritisation or for painting a convincing picture of what Britain will be for, following the pandemic and leaving the EU. I have no doubt that there will be a lot of eloquent material about what Britain stands for, our values and so on. I will be looking for some choices as to where Britain will prioritise our efforts.

Tom Tugendhat: You had an almost unique position sitting on the French version of that. They called it a White Paper on defence and security, but effectively it was a national security strategy. What lessons would you draw from that, or where do you think we get it right and where do they get it right?

Lord Ricketts: In 2013, they set up a broad-based advisory commission, as they called it, for their defence review. I think it had about 40 people, including some senior commentators, journalists, parliamentarians, a British diplomat and a German diplomat, so they had a range of opinion advising the team actually putting together the White Paper. I thought that was very good and stimulating, and there were some very challenging and long debates based on very eloquent papers.

They designed a strategy in a rather more inclusive way, frankly, than we have ever done. The problem was that they did it completely divorced

¹ Note by witness: Richard Graham MP asked after the session 'Given that so many of the issues in your time (and even more today) involved China, what value would there be in having a China specialist as a 'permanent' member of the NSC?'. My response is that while I understand the force of the point, given the importance of China for our national security, I am in favour of keeping the permanent membership of the NSC small, essentially the key Ministers and the Heads of the Intelligence Agencies and the Armed Forces, and inviting experts whenever they are needed. I would be concerned that adding a China specialist might lead to pressure for other subject experts to be added (Chief Scientific Adviser, a public health specialist etc) to the point where the NSC became unwieldy. The practice of inviting experts is well established and is in my view the best way of handling the wide range of threats and risks that come the way of the NSC.

from the budgetary arrangements. When the budget figures came in, at a very late stage, they found that the budget was a lot less than they needed for their strategy. There was then a crunching of gears and, in a small room somewhere, in a fortnight the whole ambition level was ratcheted down to come within range of the budget they had been set. I think the British approach of doing the budgetary and strategic issues together is more effective than writing an extremely eloquent and convincing grand strategy and then finding that the money is not there for it.¹

Q24 Lord Strasburger: I would like to talk about membership of the ISC, which, as you know, includes the heads of the intelligence agencies and the Chief of the Defence Staff. Do you think that membership skews the committee's priorities towards a certain kind of threat, for example malicious threats such as terrorism or cyberattacks, at the expense of pandemics and climate change?

Lord Ricketts: It is a very interesting question. To a degree, yes. It reflects the origins of the concept of national security, which came out of the military security of the nation at the time of the Cold War and had a very heavy military intelligence bent. It has always been a part of government work that tends to be at the more highly classified end, so a lot of the most powerful actors in terms of budget and capabilities—the military, intelligence agencies and Home Office—are represented in a big way.

That is absolutely true, but from 2010 onwards we had figures such as the Climate Change Secretary; we had both the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and a couple of other Ministers, including Oliver Letwin, who did not have departmental responsibilities. It was not focused entirely on the classified military security end of things, but with the growth of the non-military risks rather than the malicious actor threats, primarily pandemics now but others as well—climate change and so forth—it is worth thinking again as to whether the membership of the NSC needs to be broadened or people should be brought in specifically for the risks end of the discussion rather than the threats. I think that is a fair point, but there will always be a foreign policy and defence intelligence dimension to national security.

Lord Strasburger: Do you have any views on how the membership might be changed, and would you include the new Europe Secretary, Lord Frost, to take account of EU national security issues?

Lord Ricketts: You run into the problem David Cameron began to talk about; if you make the remit and the membership of the National Security Council too broad, it becomes the Cabinet under a different name and you are not prioritising. Personally, I would not involve the future relationship with the EU, because that is a whole broad dimension that of course needs to be given high priority attention, but I am not sure that wrapping it into the NSC would add much value.

I think there would be a case for having the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government as a regular member of the NSC and bringing in Ministers responsible for public health when you are looking at that aspect. I believe the Climate Change and Energy Secretary should normally be a member of the NSC as well, because that is obviously vital. Beyond that, you risk going too broad. I would not make major changes, but I would probably keep the agenda more open to the disruptive risks and natural hazards than it was in the past.

Lord Strasburger: National security bodies seem to be a bit of a growth industry. Over the last few years, we have gained the joint state threats assessment team, the Joint Biosecurity Centre, the joint cyber-force and the new investment security unit envisaged in the National Security and Investment Bill. Do such bodies usurp the primacy of the NSC or are they helpful in reducing its workload, and how could their work be brought together and co-ordinated?

Lord Ricketts: They do not usurp it, because the NSC remains a body that is, I hope, regularly chaired by the Prime Minister, and that, with the Prime Minister's authority, can deal with the most urgent and important threats. The fact that there is a whole range of bodies studying different aspects of threats and risks is not in itself a bad thing. It points to the importance of good co-ordination in the Cabinet Office and spotting when an issue is sufficiently important and elevating it to the NSC where political decisions are made.

My own feeling is that all the bodies that are doing situational awareness, if I can call it that, are fine, but the critical thing is political judgment when something needs action and money spending on it, and at the end of the day the NSC is the place for the Prime Minister to make those kinds of choices and the priority setting.

The Chair: Lady Neville-Jones? You are mute.

Richard Graham: Margaret, would you like me to ask a quick question while we are waiting?

The Chair: No, I am afraid, because we are going to run out of time. If we cannot bring in Lady Neville-Jones—

Q25 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** I am so sorry. Apologies.

Lord Strasburger has asked the question I was going to put, so I would like to ask something different. It is about emerging risks, which we have not talked about so far. What do you think of the effectiveness of the current foresight, horizon scanning and national risk assessment system? Do you reckon that it is sufficiently broad in scope and pointed in the right direction? It seems to me that it is the start of the process or machinery designed not only to enable us to manage crises that have already arisen but to help us prevent their effects.

I would be interested in your view about where one tries to go on that quite difficult set of issues, particularly emerging risks, which almost by

definition have a high degree of uncertainty. What is your view on that?

Lord Ricketts: I agree that it is both important and extremely difficult. It is partly the problem I mentioned of grabbing enough political time and energy to address issues that are perhaps emerging but have not yet emerged and impacted. We saw that in 2010 when we identified as natural hazards flooding and pandemic flu. You talked about the action that followed from that. The critical thing to my mind is that, where money was spent, it was on the hazard that was happening every year, which was floods. Floods had a lot of money spent on them. It did not stop them happening, but they got investment.

The pandemic risk finally did not get serious money spent on it, despite the exercise evidence that there were shortfalls. I think there has been a cultural problem in Whitehall, and probably in other Governments as well, that ministries of finance are very reluctant to spend serious money on redundant capacity that would be useful if an emerging threat happened, but equally would not be so useful if it did not happen, as against spending money on the immediate crisis of the day. Money was spent on NHS winter crises year by year, and not on providing the kind of in-reserve capacity that would have been useful when the pandemic struck. Perhaps it will be easier after this pandemic, but my worry is that now we will spend the next five years preparing much better public health horizon scanning, early warning and preparedness, and miss the next risk that is coming, which might be in the area of climate, grid security or whatever it might be.

Baroness Neville-Jones: That was where I was trying to point you. I entirely agree with and accept what you have just said. Money is crucial. If you do not get an allocation of money, you do not get action of a serious kind.

I was trying to get at the whole question of whether, with the horizon-scanning system, which I suppose is the start point for threat assessment and then moving into risk, we are adventurous enough and take enough advice and consult sufficiently internationally as well as domestically. We have huge expertise in this country scattered through our universities and our academic system, but also a lot of it in government. I cannot help feeling that we are not tapping enough of our own capabilities to get a picture of what is coming at us gradually, which is not a crisis yet but which we need to start thinking about to make our system more resilient.

Resilience has not featured in our discussions, but it must be part of the outcome of a good national security system. First, how do you think we have managed to start off intellectually by scanning the scene? Secondly, how do we feed that through to greater resilience without having to manage a crisis?

Lord Ricketts: Yes, without having to wait for the crisis to happen. Funding resilience has been the Cinderella of Whitehall crisis management for many years, and it has now caught us up, so perhaps there will be more attention applied to it. It is not an area in which I am a

great specialist, but I am not convinced that more horizon scanning by more brilliant people will help the critical decision-making that needs to be done in government to start spending money on a particular potential emerging risk.

One of the problems is that the more you look, the more you find extremely worrying potential emerging trends that could develop into a major crisis, but the Treasury will not be prepared to fund resilience, to a large degree, on all of them. As usual, it comes down to choosing, priority setting and delivering and following through, and those are essentially political decisions. By all means, let us try to have a more methodical system of horizon scanning and reporting that up the chain to the NSC, but we cannot expect Ministers to start taking decisions on those sorts of potentially emerging risks unless they are very compelling in the way they are presented, and the evidence is that it really might happen quite soon; otherwise, they will not make it into the top category of the political agenda.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Given how costly realised risks are, I find it depressing that you think we cannot do more by way of prevention.

Lord Ricketts: I said what I have said. It would be great to think we can, but highlighting and isolating the risk that is going to materialise and become critically important is so difficult. I am not convinced that there will be a culture change even as a result of this crisis.

The Chair: Thank you. Can I take this opportunity to apologise, Mr Graham? I am trying to get through the agenda as we had scheduled it, but you were kind to offer.

Q26 **Baroness Henig:** Lord Ricketts, you talked earlier about dealing with external crisis management through a sub-committee of the NSC. I want to turn to the relationship between the NSC and COBRA. During the early time of the pandemic, there seemed to be some interchangeability between the use of COBRA and the NSC. In the early days, was there a clear demarcation between the two when you were National Security Adviser? How did you envisage the relationship between those two bodies at that early stage?

Lord Ricketts: In my mind, there was a fairly clear distinction between the policy-setting Cabinet committee role of the NSC and the tactical crisis management that was done in COBRA—COBRA being a large room in the basement of the Cabinet Office with a number of rooms around the outside where all the main departments had their own IT. It is a place where, logistically and practically, you can bring every possible Whitehall department and intelligence agency, the military and all the rest, to sit in their offices with their own IT and pool it all in a very tactical, hour-by-hour crisis management way around the table of COBRA. The two things should be quite distinct.

It gets a bit blurred if the Prime Minister decides that he wants to go down to that room and hold his NSC meeting there to emphasise it, or

perhaps because it has better IT and video-conferencing facilities than the Cabinet room, but the two are conceptually distinct. It is in COBRA that you would want to meet 24/7 to handle a deep crisis as it evolved hour by hour.

Baroness Henig: To delve a little deeper, it is suggested, and seems to have been the case, that in the early weeks of the pandemic the COBRA machinery was meeting regularly and the NSC was not meeting. Does that surprise you?

Lord Ricketts: Yes, it does a bit, but it highlights the problem of deciding when a brewing crisis will become a major strategic threat to the country and needs to be elevated. As I have understood it, there were five meetings in COBRA that the Prime Minister did not chair while the pandemic was approaching us and there was plenty of horizon-scanning evidence and situational awareness of what was happening in China, Italy and so on. I would have thought that the broader strategic threat that represented would have been on a National Security Council agenda in that period.

The fact that the Prime Minister does not always chair COBRA is less of a surprise. COBRA by its nature can be chaired by whichever Minister is in charge of the issue at the time, but I think it illustrates the problem of deciding when what could just be a manageable event is becoming something that is putting the security of the country at risk.

Q27 **Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho:** Sir David Omand sees a greater need for the NSC to be given what he calls "strategic notice" of future challenges and envisages the Joint Intelligence Committee providing that function. Do you agree with that? Did you get such strategic notices in the periods between national security strategies?

Lord Ricketts: First, I agree with it. When I was chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, it was part of the role. I was formally responsible for warning, as it was called then. That was inherited from the Cold War when the chairman of the JIC was formally tasked with giving warning to the Government of rising threats of military action against the UK. The warning function is inherent in the JIC process.

Nowadays, warnings have to be given about a much wider range of issues—in this case pandemics, but potentially other disruptive risks in the future. Whether the Joint Intelligence Organisation is the right body to have that responsibility across the board I am not sure, but David Omand flags up an important point about knowing who has formal responsibility in the Government for that warning function.

Certainly, where warning is given that something bad is brewing on the horizon, I would have thought that it ought automatically to come to the National Security Adviser and be on the agenda of a National Security Council meeting, so that senior Ministers can be warned about the emerging threat at an early stage, but I am not sure whether the Joint

Intelligence Organisation as a body has the expertise to give that kind of strategic notice of issues such as pandemics and climate emergencies.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: To that point, which you have mentioned in answer to other questions as well, do you think that aspects of the national security machinery, including the national security risk assessments, do enough to tap into external communities, and do you think there is more opportunity for a two-way process where they plug into the processes you have just talked about?

Lord Ricketts: I think there is more opportunity. The whole national security risk assessment process, as I remember it, is classified, and it comes out of a world where there is a lot of classified information behind risk assessment in some areas but not in others. National security risks are broadening and increasingly moving away from the military security area, so we ought to be tapping into wider expertise in the country for risks that are outside the perimeter of classified information. There will be some that always have to be treated in the classified world, but there are many that do not need to be, and probably the culture needs to change to tap into a wider range of expertise beyond the Government.

Q28 **Lord Laming:** Lord Ricketts, you may have noticed that in the Government's submission to our inquiry a distinction is drawn between the NSC's responsibility for what are described as "lessons identified" from exercises, and departments' responsibilities for what are described as "lessons learned". Given what has happened so far in the Covid pandemic, do you think the NSC should now have a role in auditing the lessons learned from exercises that have taken place?

Lord Ricketts: I saw that reference and, to be honest, I am a bit mystified by it. I do not really understand the difference between lessons identified and lessons learned. There is not much point in having a lesson identified unless it is learned. The two seem to me to go together.

As David Cameron said, it is obviously essential that there is follow-up and that decisions taken are implemented, and the Cabinet Office and the NSC should most certainly have a role in that. There is a lot to be said for the idea of a consolidated statement to Parliament every year by a senior Minister to show that things are being followed up, lessons have been learned and action has been taken.

The point about lesson learning is that actions should flow, including spending money, which is often what it comes down to, and the Cabinet Office has an important role in that. In the end, it has to be up to the individual departments that will have the money to decide that a particular lesson is important enough that money needs to be spent on correcting it and making the policy more resilient for the future, but it is fundamental to the NSC's role of identifying priorities and lessons learned that they should be followed through and money should be spent on implementing them.

Lord Laming: Your response gave me great comfort. Because of the

state of my ignorance, I tried to raise this question with Mr Cameron. It seems to me as if the NSC operates almost exclusively at central government level, but we know that, very often, issues are best handled at local level, involving local organisations, be it local authorities, devolved Administrations, local mayors and the like. Do you think we need to broaden the scope of the NSC to make sure that it has that wider remit?

Lord Ricketts: I am conscious of the time, but you touch on a very important issue. It is to do with resilience and ensuring that resilience is levelled up—to use that term—right across the country, and that central government has enough reach into all parts of the country that crisis management can be carried out effectively.

When I was National Security Adviser in charge of the civil contingencies unit, which is the body in the Cabinet Office which deals with this, I was personally struck by how relatively weak central government's role and presence in the regions now is. We no longer have government offices for the regions; we have a plethora of structures, devolved Administrations, local government tiers, now elected mayors, and no clear lead. In most crises, the first hours are probably dealt with by the chief constable, because that is the person with the resources and capabilities.

I draw a parallel with France, where the préfet system means that in a crisis the representative of the central government takes command of all aspects of the state: police, fire service, emergency responders and health, requisitioning resources if he needs them. I am not suggesting that we should set up a préfet system here, but it is a point of comparison. In my experience as ambassador, local response to crises of different kinds was very well managed with that central crisis management authority. I am not sure that in the UK we have that any more, beyond London where Ministers are physically present.

The Chair: As you said in another context, Lord Ricketts, there is also the question of resources. I am tempted to give a potential definition of the distance between lessons learned and lessons—what was it?

Lord Ricketts: Identified.

The Chair: Lessons identified, but ignored perhaps.

Thank you very much indeed for coming and for your contribution. If I may, I will ask you, as I asked Mr Cameron, because colleagues may have wanted to raise different points, whether we can write to you if there is something that people feel has remained unanswered.

Lord Ricketts: Of course, with pleasure. I would be very happy to help the committee.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I also thank all colleagues on the committee. I apologise to those we did not manage to bring in, particularly Mr Graham, but on the whole we have dealt with most of our agenda. We are very grateful to you, Lord Ricketts.