

Liaison Committee

Oral evidence: Evidence from the Prime Minister, HC 1285

Wednesday 24 March 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 24 March 2021.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Karen Bradley; Sarah Champion; Yvette Cooper; Stephen Crabb; Mr Tobias Ellwood; Meg Hillier; Jeremy Hunt; Darren Jones; Julian Knight; Angus Brendan MacNeil; Huw Merriman; Mel Stride; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-97

Witness

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

Examination of witness

Witness: Boris Johnson MP.

Chair: Welcome to this meeting of the Liaison Committee of the House of Commons and our evidence session with the Prime Minister. Prime Minister, it is very good to see you here again at the first of the 2021 meetings. We will have you twice more this year, and we are very grateful for that.

Our main session today is about three topics. Obviously, covid is still top of our political agenda but we are going to start with the UK's place in the world, because of the upcoming COP26 summit, the defence White Paper and the integrated review. Then we will come to covid, then we will do the economy, and if we please have time—we will have time—we will ask for the Government's views about lifting the covid restrictions on Parliament, to get Parliament back to its full effectiveness.

The Prime Minister: Okay.

Chair: First, may I go to Darren Jones, Chair of the BEIS Select Committee?

Q1 **Darren Jones:** Thank you, Sir Bernard, and good afternoon, Prime Minister.

The world has to decarbonise by 45% by 2030; so far, climate action plans submitted at the UN have only got us 1% of that way. Will you be providing the COP unit with more resources to help countries improve their plans before they arrive at COP this November?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: Darren, thank you very much. The COP26 summit is one of the single biggest priorities that any Government could have domestically, let alone internationally. It is a massive job, and we are throwing everything at it.

Every Department in Whitehall is now thinking about COP and how we can reduce our emissions and deliver on our NDC. Alok—the President—and his team are well staffed at the moment, but clearly we will be looking to beef that up as we go forward through the year. I hope that will be of some reassurance to you because I agree with you that they need to be properly staffed.

In terms of our international reach, you should know that after the UK became the first major country to go for a net zero target, so far—long before November—China, the United States, Japan, Germany, Brazil, Canada, France, Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, Kazakhstan, Austria, Chile, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Denmark, Hungary, Finland, New Zealand, Costa Rica, Slovenia, Fiji, the Marshall Islands and Andorra have all committed to net zero targets. That was thought to be very wildly ambitious by the UK when we did it, but we are now seeing country after country across the world coming into line with global Britain.

Q2 **Darren Jones:** Thank you, Prime Minister.

In the past few weeks, we have had the argument about the new coal mine in Cumbria, the Transport Secretary wanting to make it cheaper to fly within the UK and the Green Homes grant being cut by £1 billion—and presumably, in cutting our aid budget we are also cutting climate aid. Do you think other countries will listen to us when we ask them to do better on climate action?

The Prime Minister: Yes, because first of all the UK's NDC of 68% reductions on 1990 levels is a huge commitment. People can see how big that is and how determined we are; they also know that we have an incredible record of doing it. The UK has already delivered very considerable cuts in CO₂. My political lifetime is longer than yours, but just in my political lifetime we have done a colossal amount to decarbonise our country.

In 1970, when I was six years old—I doubt you were even born—90% of our emissions, of our energy, came from coal. That is now down to much less than 1%.

Q3 **Darren Jones:** Thank you, Prime Minister; I am afraid I am limited on time, so we don't have time to go back to the 1970s. I need to move on.

It has been reported that you personally brokered the deal for the UK to spend £400 million buying the satellite company OneWeb and that the Chancellor personally had to sign the cheque. Are both those reported facts correct?

The Prime Minister: Well, certainly the Government was involved at all levels in doing the deal.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q4 **Darren Jones:** Were you, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I don't think I should comment exactly on who did what, but I think the ambition for the UK to have a presence in space and in the low Earth orbit market is a notable one and an important one. For too long, the UK has been left behind in the space race—

Darren Jones: Thank you, Prime Minister—

The Prime Minister: This is an area of colossal commercial importance, so we need to be there.

Q5 **Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, I do not mean to cut in; I just wanted to know whether you and the Chancellor were personally involved in brokering that deal. Could I just ask: which budget line in Government did the £400 million come from?

The Prime Minister: The commitment, as you will know, is one that the whole of Government has made, but if you are asking which Department is responsible for space strategy, then the responsibility lies with the Secretary of State for BEIS—Kwasi Kwarteng.

Q6 **Darren Jones:** Thank you for that, Prime Minister.

Lastly, I understand that David Cameron contacted one of your special advisers in No.10 to try to secure public funds for Greensill. Is that correct?

The Prime Minister: That is news to me. Any such contacts or whatever of course will be registered in the proper way.

Q7 **Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, might I just say that you have not provided an answer in response to any of my questions about whether you personally brokered the OneWeb deal, whether the Chancellor personally signed the cheque and whether Mr Cameron was having private conversations with your special advisers? From a parliamentary scrutiny and oversight perspective—

The Prime Minister: Darren, with great respect to you—I do not wish in any way to disagree with what you have just said—but certainly on your point about contact between David Cameron, a former Prime Minister, and my office, or anybody in my office, I simply have no knowledge of that. “That is news to me” is what I said to you.

On the deal with OneWeb, that was obviously a deal done by the Government.

Darren Jones: Thank you, Prime Minister. I am afraid that we have run out of time, but I have enjoyed our time together. Back to you, Sir Bernard.

Chair: Unless the Public Accounts Committee wants to comment on that, I will move straight on. Tobias Ellwood.

Q8 **Mr Ellwood:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you Prime Minister.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I very much welcome the integrated review publication, spelling out Britain's vision and the growing threats that we face.

Parking aside how we might respond, Prime Minister, would you agree with this picture, as drawn up from the integrated review: the security environment is deteriorating; democracy and pluralism will continue to decline, with strains on our international institutions; maritime tensions will increase; China's assertiveness will not diminish; Russia will continue to be a threat to European security; threats of terrorism will remain; new domains of space and cyber will pose significant challenges; and climate change will progressively impact on global food and water security?

Sir, do you agree with that summary? A simple yes or no, please.

The Prime Minister: That sounds very sensible to me.

Q9 **Mr Ellwood:** So we concur on that. During the cold war, defence spending was at 4% of GDP. Today's threats are indeed more complex and more dangerous, yet we remain on a peacetime defence budget of just 2.2%.

We absolutely welcome the force structure shake-up and the investment in SF lethality, and cyberspace resilience is also welcomed. But it is coming at a huge price, with sweeping cuts to our conventional defence posture, exposing us to the very threats that you and I both agree are there.

Is it not time to move Britain to a conflict footing and raise defence spending to at least 3%—not just to defend our interests, but to play a leadership role to counter growing global instability?

The Prime Minister: Tobias, I have a high regard for your expertise in this area; you and I have discussed these questions many times. I know that you care passionately about this subject.

I just wish to be clear: the 2.2% is an increase. It is not that we are remaining at 2.2%; we have gone up to 2.2% as a result of the biggest investment in our armed forces, in defence, since the end of the cold war: a £24 billion investment. It is a full spectrum investment. It covers everything from cyber, to modernising and protecting our tanks, to enabling us to go ahead with the future combat air system that I think will be essential for defending our skies in future and enabling us to project force abroad.

The UK is one of the few countries in the world able to project force at 8,000 miles or more, and this integrated defence, security and foreign policy review allows us to continue to do just that.

Q10 **Mr Ellwood:** Thank you for that, but there are some concerns that I have. The Ranger brigade is very much welcome, but we are cutting our Marines to just 400. You mentioned the Tempest—that is also welcome, but in order to pay for that in the future, we are having to cut back on the F-35s and indeed on our Typhoons, and our special forces are going to lose their C-130 aircraft.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I would be very grateful if you could look at these details, but I am concerned about the wider picture: we are not gauging ourselves up for what is coming over the hill. It does feel a little bit like there is competition in our time and we are in denial as to the scale of threats that we face.

Could I move on to another subject, which is to do with the Office for Veterans' Affairs? News has come out today that there will be a 40% cut in the support here, with a reduction of its budget from £5 million to £3 million. I know you are passionate about supporting our armed forces and the veterans as well. We have come a long way in providing that support. Could I ask you to revisit this decision?

The Prime Minister: Thanks very much, Tobias. There is no decision that has been taken about the Office for Veterans' Affairs. The spending on veterans is, after all, not primarily through that office, although Johnny Mercer and his team do an outstanding job.

We spend up to £18 million through the NHS on specific mental health services that are targeted at veterans, and £10 million to support veterans' mental health charities. We have national insurance rebates—obviously subsidised—for those who hire veterans, as well as cut-price transport or free transport for veterans on public transport, which is something I remember actually pioneering when I was Mayor of London. I am very proud that we have taken that into Government as well.

Q11 **Mr Ellwood:** Thank you. My final question is to do with where we might be putting troops in at the earliest occasion: Yemen. A ceasefire has been put forward by Saudi Arabia. A possible political solution could be secured. We are the UN Security Council penholder. You and I worked on this subject for some time. Would we be willing to provide troops, if they are requested, for a UN stabilisation force?

The Prime Minister: We have indeed worked on it, Tobias, and I remember vividly some of the very creative plans that you suggested to me—for instance, a mission to consolidate Hodeidah and other projects that we discussed—and I know how much you care about the peace and security of Yemen.

We of course back the UN-led approach that has been led by Martin Griffiths, as we both know. I do believe that is the best way forward. It is encouraging that there is a ceasefire now between the Saudi forces and the Houthis; we must hope that that leads to serious political progress. I think that it was not realistic simply to say that the Houthis could not be negotiated with or talked to in any way. I don't think that was going to work—if you remember, that was a previous approach.

I think we now have an opportunity to go further. There has been no specific request or suggestion for UK engagement, but it is certainly something that we would be prepared to look at if the conditions were right. But I have to stress, before everybody on the Committee pricks up their ears, that the conditions in Yemen would really have to be very



HOUSE OF COMMONS

different from what they are now for us to go ahead with boots on the ground.

Mr Ellwood: Thank you, sir.

- Q12 **Chair:** Thank you, Prime Minister. Can I just interject with one point? The decision in the integrated review to raise the cap on the number of warheads came as something of a surprise. Continuous at-sea deterrence has always been a bipartisan policy based on quite a broad consensus. Of course there are dissenters, but it has been a bipartisan policy. What measures are the Government going to take to build the same kind of consensus around this more controversial decision about raising the cap on the number of warheads?

The Prime Minister: Thanks very much, Sir Bernard. You obviously personally have a great deal of expertise in this field, and you are absolutely right to raise it. But it is crucial to stress that the number in question, which is in the integrated review, is a ceiling; it is not a target. We remain, as a Government, committed to the minimum credible deterrent, and it is very important for everybody to understand that as well.

- Q13 **Chair:** I hope that there will be open discussion—as far as we can be open—across the party divide.

The Prime Minister: Yes, and it certainly ought to be possible, on Privy Council terms, for members of the Committee to receive a briefing about the nature of the decisions.

Chair: Thank you. We move on now to Sarah Champion.

- Q14 **Sarah Champion:** Prime Minister, on Monday you committed to spending £188 billion on defence over the coming four years, which is an increase of 14%. I am curious: how is there enough money in the public purse to increase defence spending, but not enough to maintain the UK's legal commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on aid?

The Prime Minister: Sarah, thank you. You asked me the same sort of questions last time—quite properly, because you, certainly, care about this issue greatly, and so do I.

Being a great aid donor has been one of the most important features of our country—of global Britain—over the past few years. But I just want to try to reassure you that we still are, and £10 billion, which is what we are giving this year in UK taxpayers' money, is a huge sum. We remain one of the biggest—if not the single biggest—European donor, for instance, to Yemen, which Tobias was just raising.

You ask how we can find the cash for this, and the answer is that times are very tight. We have had to spend £407 billion supporting our public services and our economy through covid. I think that people do understand that these are the exceptional circumstances that were foretold in the 2015 Act and that it is reasonable for us to deviate from that Act under these extreme circumstances.



Q15 Sarah Champion: Thank you, Prime Minister.

In the integrated review, you argue that absolute poverty is set to be eliminated in Asia and Latin America by the 2030s, but by 2045, 85% of the poorest billion will live in Africa. You map out the projections of global population growth intersecting with climate change, poverty, conflict and instability, with all of them being at their greatest in sub-Saharan Africa. Given that stark backdrop, why have you decided to cut development funding in Africa so sharply?

The Prime Minister: Thanks, Sarah. We have not—we are still one of the world's biggest aid donors in Africa, and we will continue to be so. For instance, looking at the immediate concerns of the planet and the African continent, we are one of the biggest donors to COVAX. I think that we have given £548 million to the global vaccine alliance and £1.6 billion to GAVI. Much of that funding goes towards distributing vaccines to the poorest and neediest, particularly on the African continent.

Q16 Sarah Champion: Thank you. Prime Minister, I know that girls' education seems to be your personal development priority, and FCDO has said that it will place gender equality at the heart of the UK's ODA work, but you are cutting funding to the International Planned Parenthood Federation, which will lead to 7.5 million unintended pregnancies, 2.7 million unsafe abortions and 22,000 maternal deaths, according to its director general.

You are also cutting by 60% an International Rescue Committee family planning programme for adolescent girls in Sierra Leone, a country where one in 17 dies in childbirth. You have also cut another IRC project in Lebanon that would have provided vital gender-based violence and child protection services to 107,000 women and girls. These are just the examples that we know of. How does it feel, Prime Minister, when your ambition and the reality are so starkly apart?

The Prime Minister: No Prime Minister, and nobody who cares about any of these issues, could conceivably want to make these changes and these cuts now. I am simply asking you and people watching to understand the particular difficulties that we face right now and our determination to get back to 0.7% when the fiscal position allows. But I think people will also understand our earnestness. I want to see another 40 million girls into education by 2025. That ambition is still there. We have the funding for that, and we think we can do that.

Although you have mentioned some things that we sadly cannot do, there are plenty of things that we are going to continue to do. Our campaign is for 12 years of quality education for every girl in the world, and together with Uhuru Kenyatta later this year we will be leading the girls' education summit to try to promote that cause. We are spending a great deal of money on it, but it is also about talking the issue up.

Q17 Sarah Champion: Does that mean you are therefore ring-fencing all the money around girls' education and preventing violence against women and girls?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: It is a priority of the Government, and the programme will continue to the best of our abilities. Our target remains unchanged: we want another 40 million girls around the world to receive a quality education by 2025—40 million who, without British intervention, would not otherwise get that education they need.

Q18 **Sarah Champion:** Thank you, Prime Minister. Finally, my Committee is grateful for the support you gave to keep us, but sadly your officials appear less pleased and they are making it extremely difficult for Philip Barton to appear before us on 13 April to discuss the changes in the aid budget. Can I ask you to intervene and make him come in front of us, please?

The Prime Minister: I have intervened, and Philip Barton will appear. But, to be absolutely, clear, Philip is a wonderful man and I don't believe he would have been remotely reluctant to come. But he is coming.

Q19 **Chair:** Thank you for that. I understand he is the accounting officer for the very large aid budget.

Can I just raise a point about the science component of the aid budget? You have got a letter from Greg Clark—you may not have this in your briefing, because the letter only went yesterday—that points out that the Government has announced that the BEIS ODA allocation to UK Research and Innovation has reduced significantly as part of the cuts in the budget because we are now taking Horizon out of the science budget. Can you address that, too—that it is not our intention to have a dip in science funding just because we have signed up to the Horizon programme?

The Prime Minister: Horizon, Bernard, as you know, is a wonderful pan-European project that is extremely costly. The way it operates at the moment is that the UK spends a lot up front and does not get much back for a while. So we are looking at that, but in the context of a huge increase in investment in science and R&D generally—there has never been anything like it under any previous Government, with another £24 billion.

Q20 **Chair:** I appreciate that, but I think the particular concern is the dip in funding creates discontinuity in existing funding programmes, which would be most unfortunate.

The Prime Minister: I am aware of that. I have discussed it with the Chancellor, Patrick Vallance and others, and we want to make sure that scientists do not have that discontinuity that you talk about.

Chair: I am most grateful. Angus Brendan MacNeil on trade, please.

Q21 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Thank you very much. This section, as we know, is the UK's place in the world, and specifically the UK's place in the world with a trade link and a topical link. This weekend, the clocks go forward to British summer time, and many people, of course, will be looking forward to the less dark evenings. Will this happen next year, Prime Minister? The EU are not going to do this, apparently, and according to the House of Commons Library, the UK has set no times for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

clock changes in 2022. Can you tell us whether the UK will be copying the EU and opting for longer, darker summer nights, or will you be maintaining British summer time, which would have the added benefit, of course, of putting our businesses in the same time zone as those in Europe?

The Prime Minister: Angus, that is an extremely good question. The road map that we have set out for taking our country on the path of freedom, as you know, goes so far to 21 June. We have not looked forward to exactly what is going to be happening next spring in terms of the clocks, but I am happy to take that one away.

Q22 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** So you could be the Prime Minister who kills British summer time. Is this a possibility?

The Prime Minister: I will have a look at the suggestion that you have made, but it seems unlikely to me.

Q23 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Okay. Moving on a little bit and looking at the world. Democracy and respect for democracy and the ballot box is under threat in many places. China, Russia and places like Belarus play fast and loose with the relationship with the ballot box. I think it is important that we assert our commitment to democracy and our support for the outcomes of the ballot box. I know you are not, at the moment, in favour of a referendum on Scottish independence, so I will not ask about that. I am asking this: if the Scottish people—or the Welsh people, given the way the polls are going—were to say at the ballot box that they wanted independence, would you respect the ballot box and that decision if it were to come about?

The Prime Minister: Angus, I am glad you talk about respecting the ballot box, because there was, as you will recollect, a vote on Scottish separation and the break-up of the UK. I am very keen to respect that vote.

Q24 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** But if the people vote in future? You said that the general election of 2019 was a once-in-a-lifetime general election. I hope that does not mean you are thinking that is the end of democracy in the UK. I am talking about the future. First, I am sure there will be more general elections in the UK as long as it continues to exist in its current form. But if the Scottish people, or indeed the Welsh people, were to vote for independence, Prime Minister, would you respect what the people would say at the ballot box? Remember, people in China, Russia and Belarus are watching you.

The Prime Minister: Well, Angus, I don't think even my worst enemies or biggest detractors would say that I at any stage promised to abolish general elections—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: You did say it was once in a generation.

The Prime Minister: —or try to get rid of them. There is a clear difference between the two things. When you ask people to vote on a highly controversial, divisive issue—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Angus Brendan MacNeil: It might not be divisive. *[Inaudible.]* I want to know your principles on democracy.

The Prime Minister: —which breaks up family relationships and is extremely toxic and divisive, and you tell them that it will happen once in a generation, I think you should stick to it.

Q25 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** I think what is toxic and divisive is obstructing democracy. I hope you would not do that, Prime Minister. I hope you respect democracy and not play fast and loose, as we have seen in China, Russia, Belarus and such places. I will give you one more chance: do you respect the ballot box?

The Prime Minister: I greatly respect the ballot box. What I will say about another referendum—an independence, separation referendum—that the SNP continually campaigns for, is that I think it is striking and inapposite that now, when we are trying to come together to come through a pandemic and to build back better together, that instead of talking about any other aspect of global Britain and all the things we do together—our armed forces, our security services, our scientists working together around the world—*[Interruption.]*—which is one of the most moving and extraordinary things—all we hear about is breaking up the Union.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: We are used to this pre-rehearsed stuff.

Chair: Order. Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I have finished my answer, Sir Bernard.

Q26 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Moving on to CPTPP that the UK is interested in, do we have any figures on the GDP gain? So far, the UK has left the European Union and has got an awful lot of paperwork, so much so that Loch Fyne Oysters this week were saying that it was £500 extra per load and 38 pages. It is a 4.9% damage to GDP. So far, there has been no trade deal signed that gains any of this loss to GDP. Do you have any idea what the GDP gain might be from the CPTPP?

The Prime Minister: The overall benefits of trade deals are well attested—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Any numbers?

The Prime Minister: —and the ambition of this country is to continue to secure them. We have done more than 60 trade deals already, and the countries we have secured deals with will cover 80% of UK trade by the end of next year. You are making a serious point about the detriment to exporters of some products, particularly fishing products, earlier this year. There are continuing problems and I humbly accept that. It is in some ways regrettable that some of our continental friends did not perhaps make life as easy as they could have done.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: But will you have a trade deal—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: We are doing what we can to redress the matter, and we have a £23 million fund to support the fishing industry with some of the bureaucratic problems, but also a £100 million fund to enable Scottish fishing to build up—[*Interruption.*—]in preparation, Angus, for the time when we control access to the right to fish every fish in Scottish waters.

Q27 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** I come back to trade. We know that there is no trade deal—no new trade deal—and the trade deals you refer to are ro-ro trade deals, which are the sort of things that give no extra gain because we had them in the first place anyway. So we have lost 4.9% of GDP, and we have gained nothing so far. The best an American trade deal can give you is 0.2%, so it is the equivalent of losing £4.90 and gaining 20p. Australia is worth about 2p, New Zealand is worth about 1p. I am trying to find out what you think CPTPP is worth. Some people are saying that that is not worth very much either—maybe between 1p and 3p.

The Prime Minister: Global free trade is something that is of great value and UK exports actually rose last year. I think we are now the fifth biggest exporter in the world, with less than 1% of the global population. That is a stunning achievement and it is thanks to the UK working together with a great UK single market, exporting to the rest of the world with uninterrupted supply chains, and I think it would be foolhardy for anybody—I cannot believe that you would even think of it—to detach Scotland from the rest of the UK economy, and break up our supply chains.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: You will see how well Wales and Scotland—

Chair: Order. I think you have run over your time, Angus. We will move on to Stephen Crabb from the Welsh Affairs Committee.

Q28 **Stephen Crabb:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister, Vaccination programme aside, why have so many parts of the pandemic response across the constituent nations of the United Kingdom been fragmented, disjointed and divisive? What went wrong with the four nations approach?

The Prime Minister: Stephen, I am not sure I am going to accept the premise. Actually, there are clearly competences that the devolved Administrations have, and it is very important that messaging should be as direct and as local as possible, and that has been a good thing. We have worked together very closely, and if you look at the road map that we have set out, it is actually very similar to those that are being followed around the whole of the UK. You rather dismiss the vaccination programme as though it did not show the benefits of the Union, but plainly it has. It has been incredible to go around the country and see it. As Angus would concede, Scottish scientists in Livingston or Scottish postgrads in Glasgow University are doing the testing that we depend on to isolate the genomic sequencing of the bug throughout the whole of the UK. British Army people are distributing vaccines across the whole country. It has been an amazing Union effort.



- Q29 **Stephen Crabb:** The point about the vaccination programme is that it was based on central Government decision making, particularly around procurement, rather than leaving it for four separate Administrations to make up their own schemes and make up their own rules around this. Prime Minister, do you think it was a mistake 12 months ago not to deploy central civil contingencies measures to be able to lead a genuinely UK-wide response?

The Prime Minister: There are some people who argue that. I think a time will come when we can look back and evaluate the way the messaging worked and the impact of the way we did it. That will be one of the things I know that we will be looking at in the inquiry.

One of the things we are trying to do now with the new UK health security agency is not to take away powers from the devolved Administrations, but to make sure that we concert our energies and our thinking more closely together.

- Q30 **Stephen Crabb:** Thank you, Prime Minister. You have previously spoken about the good co-operation you have felt has happened with the devolved Administrations. The Welsh First Minister, when he was in front of my Committee three weeks ago, said in contrast that he does not really have a relationship with you. He described it as a "remote" relationship, and complained that you do not talk to him. What do you think should be the appropriate amount of time that a UK Prime Minister invests in building, maintaining and sustaining relationships with the First Ministers of the devolved Administrations?

The Prime Minister: I am sorry to hear that Mark Drakeford does not feel he gets enough time with me. I will do what I can to rectify that. I have had some very good meetings and conversations with him, but clearly the way it works is that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has generally chaired the meetings involved. That is how it has tended to work, and it has been pretty effective. As I said earlier, it is a system that has produced much more unity than is commonly supposed from the coverage.

- Q31 **Stephen Crabb:** Do you think we would have a stronger Union by a Prime Minister investing more direct time themselves with the First Ministers, or is it fine just to devolve that function almost entirely to the CDL?

The Prime Minister: I think that the role of the Prime Minister of the UK is to lead the whole of the UK. I am very much in favour of the Council of the Isles, where we come together as representatives across the whole of the British Isles to talk about issues that matter to us. On the other hand, I do not think that we want to turn our deliberations into a kind of mini-EU, if I may say so.

- Q32 **Stephen Crabb:** Finally, if there were a new First Minister in Scotland after the Scottish parliamentary elections, would you choose to invest more time in the relationship? Is that something you would decide to do?



The Prime Minister: I hope I have made my point about the way I think that this should work. I am the Prime Minister of Scotland as well as of the whole of the UK. Obviously, I need a good relationship with everybody and I have talked many times to Nicola, to Mark, to Michelle and Arlene and I continue to do so. That is the way it should be. But what I do not think would necessarily be right is to have a permanent council, as it were, of the kind that is taking place tomorrow in Brussels. I do not think that is the model we are after.

Q33 **Chair:** As we get to the end of this first section about our place in the world, how will the devolved Governments and Parliaments be engaged in the COP26 preparations?

The Prime Minister: They are already involved because COP26 is taking place in Glasgow. Indeed, I have just pointed out to Angus that it is one of the beauties of the Union that the UN brings this summit to the UK, to Glasgow. It is thanks to our collective membership of the Union that we are able to host it in Glasgow, and that is a great thing. There are all sorts of conversations going on about the look and feel of the summit, what it is going to involve, the fringe and all that kind of stuff.

Chair: We will move on to our next section, on covid. We start with the Chairman of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Q34 **Jeremy Hunt:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I want to start with the vaccine issues in the news today. You have been totally clear about your opposition to vaccine nationalism or vaccine protectionism, but if British lives were at risk, do you rule out taking measured and proportionate retaliation to discourage the EU from impeding legally binding contracts for our vaccines?

The Prime Minister: Jeremy, thank you very much for the question. You are right to follow this issue as closely as you are. The partnership we have with our European colleagues is very important, and we continue to work with them. Vaccines, as you know, are the product of international co-operation. I don't think that blockades of vaccines, medicines or ingredients for vaccines are sensible, and I think that the long-term damage done by blockades can be very considerable. I would just gently point out to anybody considering a blockade or an interruption of supply chains that companies may look at such actions and draw conclusions about whether or not it is sensible to make future investments in countries where arbitrary blockades are imposed.

Q35 **Jeremy Hunt:** What is clear is that although you wish our European friends well, you are not taking anything off the table in terms of a British response to decisions this week.

The Prime Minister: Our priority is to continue the vaccine roll-out, to vaccinate the British people. We will do everything necessary that we can to ensure that that happens. We are on course to vaccinate the JCVI groups 1 to 9 by 15 April—everybody over 50. I don't know whether you have had one yet Jeremy—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jeremy Hunt: I have had my job, Prime Minister, yes.

The Prime Minister: You have had it? There you go—you are young.

Jeremy Hunt: I still got the virus, but three days afterwards, so the immunity hadn't set in yet.

The Prime Minister: You got the virus three days after the job?

Jeremy Hunt: Yes, very bad luck it was.

The Prime Minister: I am very sorry to hear that.

Q36 **Jeremy Hunt:** But, anyway, I am very pleased, because it probably made the symptoms much less.

I want to move on, if I may, because one thing that has become very clear in the pandemic has been the vulnerability of the social care sector, where, as we know, 29,000 lives were lost in care homes. We have had 12 White Papers, Green Papers, consultations, but you did something different in your very first speech as Prime Minister. You said you would "fix the crisis in social care once and for all with a clear plan" and make sure every older person was treated with dignity and respect. Do those words still stand?

The Prime Minister: They do, and you will have heard them many times, Jeremy, since you and I stood on about 58 platforms together and recited a virtually identical script on that point.

Jeremy Hunt: Okay, good. We do agree on that.

The Prime Minister: But the serious answer to your—

Q37 **Jeremy Hunt:** Prime Minister, I am so sorry, but time is short. The reason I ask you this is that, last week, the NHS got £6.6 billion for covid costs, but there was no mention of social care in the Budget at all. I just wonder if you can understand the frustration of 1.6 million people in the sector who feel they are always treated as the poor relation. Will you be the first Prime Minister to say that social care will always be treated as equally important as the NHS?

The Prime Minister: Yes. It was one of your achievements, Jeremy, to turn it into the Department of Health and Social Care. I thought that was the right thing to do, because one of the problems that we have, although I don't want to go on about this for too long, is the gulf between the NHS and social care, into which so many people fall. That is a problem we need to fix. If you are going to ask if we need a plan to do it—a long-term plan, a 10-year plan—the answer is yes, and the Government will be bringing forward our proposals on social care and social care reform later this year.

Q38 **Jeremy Hunt:** Fantastic. Final question from me, Sir Bernard: is social care going to get a mention in the forthcoming Queen's Speech?

The Prime Minister: I think it is highly likely, but I would not wish to anticipate the Gracious Speech at this stage.



Jeremy Hunt: Thank you, Prime Minister.

Chair: Let us move on to Meg Hillier, Chairman of the PAC.

Q39 **Meg Hillier:** Thank you, Chair. Prime Minister, you say, regrets, you've had a few over the last year. Which mistake do you most regret?

The Prime Minister: Meg, thank you. I think that there are all sorts of things that I look back on and wonder whether we could have done differently. I would not want, as it were, to make a mistake about my biggest mistake and single out the wrong one. There are all sorts of all sorts of things that, as I have said before, we didn't initially understand about covid. We didn't get the effect of the asymptomatic transmission, which fed into the care homes epidemic that Jeremy has just been talking about. You heard Patrick and Chris at the press conference yesterday talking about some of the things that we still think about and discuss. We are learning the whole time, Meg. What we want is a proper inquiry, as I said earlier on today in the House—a proper inquiry in due course, when we can consecrate the time.

Q40 **Meg Hillier:** Prime Minister, some of that is around the science, and we recognise that the science has changed. But what about what Lord Macpherson described as "the most wasteful and inept public spending programme of all", Test and Trace, which you promised would be world-beating? You then promised the moonshot. Your Government has committed £37 billion to that, although it is not all yet spent. Are you content with how that has gone?

The Prime Minister: Actually, I think that Test and Trace has been an extraordinary achievement. If you said to me, "Did they get everything right first time?"—no. That is not surprising, given what—

Meg Hillier: Prime Minister, no one doubts—

The Prime Minister: Can I complete this, because it is incredibly important?

Q41 **Meg Hillier:** No one doubts, and nor does my Committee, that it ramped up testing, but it is costing £37 billion, if it spends through the money that has been allocated to it. Do you think it is value for that money?

The Prime Minister: Eighty per cent. of the spending, Meg, goes on labs, testing and giving people the results that they so desperately need. It is not just that individuals need those results; that massive testing operation allows us to know where the disease is prevalent and what type of variant it may be. We do half the genomic sequencing anywhere in the world. It is thanks to NHS Test and Trace that we know whether the disease is going up or down in localities, and that gives us the tools to fight it. It has been absolutely indispensable.

Q42 **Meg Hillier:** One of the clear tools to fight it is the tracing, Prime Minister, and Dido Harding—Baroness Harding—herself says it is a challenge to get people to isolate once you have traced them. Do you have any regrets about how you have rolled out that programme overall,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

for the money you have spent on it? I could list many others, but I am just focusing on this one for now. Do you have any regrets? Do you think it could have been done better or differently? Crucially, what do you think you are going to get for £37 billion ongoing in the future? What will that deliver for the British public?

The Prime Minister: Let me repeat what it does. If you are arguing for spending more money on the tracing as opposed to the testing, we can talk about that. We give people support if they need it to isolate. Councils have been given tens of millions of pounds extra to help people to isolate. About 9 million people have been helped to isolate who would otherwise have been in the transmission chain, and that is a very valuable thing. But what Test and Trace really does is it enables us to know what is happening with the pandemic in a very granular way, and that is absolutely crucial if you are going to fight it.

- Q43 **Meg Hillier:** Prime Minister, given the vaccines' success, do you think Test and Trace is still worth the money? As you say, you are going to have a review—there is going to be a public inquiry that will look at all these questions. Do you think, now that we have the vaccine programme rolling out and projections that it will be rolling out year after year, that £37 billion on Test and Trace is still good value for money?

The Prime Minister: If you are asking me, should we be spending money—I think it is £5 billion up to November, though you are right in the overall figure that you mentioned for the whole budget—on this scale to isolate where the disease is prevalent and where it isn't, and to see what is happening in younger groups and to see what is happening in older groups, every morning, I chair a meeting where I look at the data, the dashboard, and, every week, it has been getting better and better, and more and more detailed, and our understanding of what we are dealing with has grown. I think it has been of crucial importance to us in knowing when the disease is rising again and what we need to do to deal with it.

- Q44 **Meg Hillier:** So what you are saying is that it has really been a tool to map it.

The Prime Minister: No, it has been a tool to fight it.

- Q45 **Meg Hillier:** Well, in terms of decisions you have made, do you regret not making a decision to close down more quickly at Christmas?

The Prime Minister: That decision was made entirely in the light of what we discovered about the new variant, which again was made possible, as was the understanding of what was happening, thanks to Test and Trace. It was because we were able to see the B.1.1.7 variant—the so-called Kent variant or English variant—moving so fast that the scientists were able to make their determination about the increased velocity of transmission. That is why we made that decision.

- Q46 **Meg Hillier:** Was that Test and Trace? Wasn't it specialist scientists who had to track down the epidemiological trend for that variant?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: Both—it was both, because you can't do one without the other.

- Q47 **Meg Hillier:** Do you have any regrets about your decision at Christmas, which saw London railway stations and others crowded, with people crowding on to overcrowded trains, spreading the virus?

The Prime Minister: Of course I regret all the disruption to people's lives, the loss of education, the effects of lockdown, the loss of business, the loss of earnings. Nobody in my position could conceivably have had to take the decisions that I have taken and not regret it. Of course I do.

- Q48 **Meg Hillier:** But the Christmas decision, that was very much your personal decision—just to be clear.

The Prime Minister: I think it was the right thing to do in the light of the evidence that we had. If I recall, we were given the data about the speed of transmission on the Friday and we made the announcement on the Saturday, I think, about what needed to be done. Yes it was tough, but I think it was the right thing to do.

- Q49 **Chair:** I have taken a close interest in the difficulties at Test and Trace and I very much welcome the remarks you made admitting that it would have been better if they had organised alongside local government and involved local government much more intensively earlier. What has been learned from that? As prevalence falls, the isolation of individual cases to suppress the virus becomes much more important and much more possible because there are far fewer cases. What is being learned from that period that will be implemented going forward?

The Prime Minister: I think that if you talk to Dido, as I am sure your Committee has, and listen to the people she has been working with, she has had local government leaders with her from the beginning, and I have been talking to them as well from the beginning. Could we have simply relied on local government health officials to do all the testing and all the tracing?

- Q50 **Chair:** I am not suggesting that.

The Prime Minister: I am not certain that that would have been sensible. You needed a combination, and I think that that is what Dido would argue.

Chair: Thank you. We will move forward to Yvette Cooper, Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

- Q51 **Yvette Cooper:** Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, Prime Minister. Still on the lessons learned, last March an estimated 10,000 separate covid cases came into the country, mainly from France, Spain and Italy, with no UK border restrictions in place. Do you accept now that that was a mistake, and what lessons have you learned from it?

The Prime Minister: Thanks, Yvette. The UK, as you know, has very tough measures in place against people bringing the virus into this country from France or from anywhere else. If you come in from France in the normal way—suppose you are a British citizen returning from doing some



lawful activity in France but you are not on the special list—you have to go through a huge amount, including self-isolation for 10 days; you have to take a test 72 hours beforehand and all the rest of it; you have to take two tests, and there are very considerable fines if you fail to quarantine.

There is a group of people who are exempt, as you say. Overwhelmingly they are people who are involved in bringing in medicines or food to the UK. Typically, they turn around very rapidly and go back to France. There is an issue about whether we decide to apply more stringent measures to them, with the delays and knock-on effects that that would entail. We are certainly looking at that, but people should be under no illusions; it would have consequences.

- Q52 **Yvette Cooper:** Okay. That is not an answer to my question, which was about whether you now felt that last year's failure to put border restrictions in place was a mistake, at a time when 130 other countries did have restrictions in place and we did not. But let me turn to the current arrangements. France has 2,000 to 3,000 new cases of the South Africa and Brazil variants each day, so why have you not introduced additional measures or put France on the red list?

The Prime Minister: First of all, by the way, we did introduce bans as soon as we knew about the new variants. I wasn't quite sure what you were referring to just now—

Yvette Cooper: I was referring to last year.

The Prime Minister: If we are talking about the 23 December measures, as soon as we knew about the South African variant or the Brazilian variant, we applied travel bans on those countries, and those continue to be in place. Just for everybody's understanding, this is an issue about trying to keep out these variants, as I think you are driving at.

At the moment in the UK, those variants of concern—the effectiveness of the vaccines against them is still a matter of debate—are not rising. The numbers are low, they are stable—about 350 or so in the case of South Africa, and maybe 50 or so in the case of the Brazilian, the Manaus, variant, so much lower. We are containing those as best we can with surge testing and door-to-door tracing, which is, I think, the right thing to do, and the situation seems to be stable.

Yvette Cooper: This is not an answer—

The Prime Minister: In terms of putting France on the red list, which is what you are talking about, and the consequences that would have for UK supplies and cross-channel movements—just remember, 75% of our medicines and 50% of our food come through the short straits, so there are consequences—that is something that we will have to look at. We will have to look at tougher measures. Just because of this ambiguity about the effectiveness of the vaccines—

Yvette Cooper: That is a very long answer.



The Prime Minister: You deserved a long answer, Yvette.

- Q53 **Yvette Cooper:** You have got 20,000 people arriving from France in the UK every week. Of those, two thirds are completely exempt from all the testing and quarantine arrangements. Everyone understands that hauliers clearly cannot be covered by quarantine and carry on doing their vital job, but why are you not testing them? You have 2,000 to 3,000 new cases a day of the South Africa and Brazil variants in France; in some parts of France it is over 30% of the cases, and cases have been rising overall. So why are you not at least testing hauliers? Hauliers going to France are tested. You know that system works. Why are you not testing hauliers coming back into the UK?

The Prime Minister: The number of people coming into the UK overall from France has massively diminished. There is still—

Yvette Cooper: It is still 20,000 a week.

The Prime Minister: It was colossal; it is now greatly reduced. The people who are coming in are, as you rightly say, overwhelmingly those whose business is deemed essential for the security of supply of our country. I have explained that tougher measures would cause very serious disruption to those trade flows—

- Q54 **Yvette Cooper:** We have tougher measures going in the other direction, with testing arrangements in place for hauliers going to France, and those arrangements work, so why do you not have them coming back in the other direction?

The Prime Minister: That has to be balanced against the current ambiguity about the effectiveness of the vaccines on the variants. I agree with you, Yvette, that this is an issue of concern. It wasn't until quite recently that the situation was the other way round and we had a situation in France where things seemed more under control and, in the UK, we had more of the virus prevalent. I think we now, in all seriousness, need to look at the situation at the channel. I am afraid we can't rule out tougher measures and we will put them in if necessary. Yes, if it is necessary to bring in testing, then we will do so—

Yvette Cooper: Yes, you have given that answer. Apologies for interrupting, Prime Minister, but I am going to run out of time—

The Prime Minister: But I think you should understand the balance between doing that, the disruption it would entail and the risk that we are trying to address—

Chair: If you give long answers, Prime Minister, it just takes longer. Yvette is going to ask another question.

- Q55 **Yvette Cooper:** A series of top scientists and medics have now warned that the biggest threat to our vaccine programme and to our ability to come out of lockdown and to keep the road map on track is the potential arrival of new variants, particularly from South Africa and Brazil. We



HOUSE OF COMMONS

knew about the rising numbers of cases in the middle of February. The problem is that it is just one delay after another. When I asked you about Brazil last time you came before the Committee, there were still long delays in terms of getting those types of measures in place. There were long delays right back at the beginning. You said just this week, “previous experience has taught us that, when a wave hits our friends”—in Europe—“I’m afraid it washes up on our shores as well.” That is because we have no border restrictions in place. Shouldn’t that previous experience have taught us that what we need is effective border arrangements to stop cases spreading? Isn’t it true that your medical advisers have advised you that you need to bring in restrictions and testing on hauliers coming from France?

The Prime Minister: No, that isn’t true, but thank you for giving me the opportunity to clarify that, Yvette. There is a balance to be struck, and what we don’t know is the exact state of the efficacy of the vaccines against the new variants and we have to balance that against the very serious disruption that is entailed by curtailing cross-channel trade. This country depends very largely—for the food in our shops, for the medicines that we need—on that trade flowing smoothly.

Now, we will take a decision, no matter how tough, to interrupt that trade and to interrupt those flows if we think that it is necessary to protect public health and to stop new variants coming in. It may be that we have to do that very soon.

I would ask the Committee to think about the logical position. When you are in a state of unknowing about the potential of any possible variant around the world coming into the country, on Yvette’s logic you would put the whole of the world into a red list and stop movement of any kind flowing freely for a very long time. I am not certain that that is something that the UK economy and the UK public would understand and accept, because you are doing something to prohibit movements or to stop movements when you don’t actually know the risk that you are trying to mitigate—

Yvette Cooper: Prime Minister, that is exactly what New Zealand, Australia, South Korea and Singapore did 12 months ago, and their economies are in a stronger position—

The Prime Minister: You need to see a clearer understanding of the risk—

Chair: Thank you, Yvette. Prime Minister, have you finished?

The Prime Minister: With great respect, those countries don’t depend on other countries for 75% of their medicines and 50% of their food, and I hope that is a point that Yvette will bear in mind.

Chair: We are going to go on to data now, because you have said it is “data, not dates”. I will bring in William Wragg, Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which is responsible for the Government’s data operation.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q56 **Mr Wragg:** Thank you very much, Sir Bernard. Good afternoon, Prime Minister. It is good to have you with us. Tomorrow you will ask for the extension of the Coronavirus Act for six months, which goes past 21 June, step 4 of the road map. Why?

The Prime Minister: Thank you very much, Will. Obviously, with the road map provisions, the restrictions and the lockdowns and all that ends, so people shouldn't be confused between the two things. What we do need to do is to continue to be able to deal with the backlogs that we have built up; to be able, for instance, to use remote hearings to clear the backlog in the courts; to make sure that people who have returned to the colours in the NHS, who are volunteering, can continue to practise and to serve; and there are various powers we need to ensure that education can continue to run.

Those are the reasons why there are powers and differences that will persist beyond the end of the road map on 21 June, but be in no doubt that after 21 June, all the restrictions that we have, we hope will be gone. Remember that these are "not before" dates—that is their status.

Q57 **Mr Wragg:** Thank you for that. There are a number of provisions in the Act that the Government have not used. Prime Minister, can you give an undertaking that those provisions will be dropped? There is no point in extending rules that you have not used to date.

The Prime Minister: Yes. I think we have already weeded out quite a few, but anything that is redundant will go.

Q58 **Mr Wragg:** Thank you. On SAGE and other advisory groups, at the weekend a member of a Government advisory body said that there was not going to be any international travel this summer—that no doubt cheered the nation immensely. Is that the policy of the Government?

The Prime Minister: Who? SAGE said that, did they?

Mr Wragg: A member of a Government advisory committee.

The Prime Minister: What we are going to do is this. On 5 April, we will get the findings of the global travel taskforce, and I will be setting out what I think may be possible from 17 May. As Yvette was just saying, things are looking difficult on the continent, and we will have to look at the situation as it develops.

Q59 **Mr Wragg:** But is it helpful to have members of those august bodies freelancing across the media before decisions have been made by Ministers?

The Prime Minister: I think it is one of those things that we just have to get used to. It has been a feature of life for quite some time.

Q60 **Mr Wragg:** Do you find that it helps, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: Well, I think it shows that there is a wide spectrum of scientific opinion.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Wragg: So advisers advise and Ministers decide?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Q61 **Mr Wragg:** May I bring you on to covid vaccine certification? Do you believe that covid vaccine certification for domestic use is compatible with a free society such as ours?

The Prime Minister: I do think that the basic concept of vaccine certification should not be totally alien to us because, after all, when you are entrusted with the care of a patient, as a surgeon, you are expected to have a vaccination against hepatitis B. The principle is there. This is a particularly contagious disease; it can be very nasty indeed. We have seen what happened in care homes, as we were discussing earlier. It does not seem to me to be irresponsible at all—far from it; it is wholly responsible—for care home companies to think of requiring vaccinations.

Q62 **Mr Wragg:** You mentioned surgeons and the care sector, but that is very different from the ordinary citizen going to the pub. Do you recognise that distinction for covid vaccine certification?

The Prime Minister: I think that is the kind of thing that may be up to individual publicans and landlords, Will.

Mr Wragg: I am interested because in politics at the moment, there is not a great deal of time for thought and thinking. I am thinking back to your previous *Daily Telegraph* columns—I am not going to quote from them, don't worry.

The Prime Minister: Please do.

Mr Wragg: They are all excellent and I have read many. I cannot imagine you, in a past life, writing in support of covid vaccine certification to go to the pub.

The Prime Minister: You will appreciate, Will, that there are other distinguished members of your Committee, such as Yvette, who take a passionately opposing view about the need for tougher measures. I find myself in this long national conversation, thinking very deeply about it—I think the public have been thinking very deeply about it—and my impression is that there is a huge wisdom in the public's feeling about this. Human beings instinctively recognise when something is dangerous and nasty to them, and they can see, collectively, that covid is a threat. They want us, as their Government, and me, as the Prime Minister, to take all the actions I can to protect them. That is what I have been doing for the last year or more.

Q63 **Mr Wragg:** A quick final question from me, if I may, Sir Bernard. Prime Minister, have you thought about a graduated scheme of sanctions for infractions of the ministerial code? Do you see the straightforward sacking or resignation of a Minister to be too severe a sanction, and have you thought about introducing a range for them?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: Yes. Actually, no, I haven't thought about a range of disciplinary measures that one could take, but if you wanted to suggest lesser punishments—perhaps being asked to appear before this Committee—it is an interesting idea.

Mr Wragg: It is a pleasure, not a chore, Prime Minister!

The Prime Minister: It is a pleasure. By the way, I want to say what a pleasure it is for me to appear in front of this Committee, and no punishment at all, Sir Bernard—pure, unalloyed pleasure, at least on my part.

Chair: I recently gave evidence to the Committee on Standards in Public Life about the ministerial code. I will send you my evidence, but this idea of having a less absolute, binary decision for a Prime Minister receiving advice from the independent advisor does seem to me to give the opportunity for the Prime Minister to sort things out and rectify matters, rather than to just get a resignation and then have the Minister back 18 months later as though nothing had happened, which seems to be a rather unsatisfactory way of system learning.

Let us now move on to the economy, although there are many other questions that I would love to have asked about covid. Mel Stride.

Q64 **Mel Stride:** Thank you. Good afternoon, Prime Minister; welcome to the Committee.

Prime Minister, do you think that the spending assumptions in the forecast that the OBR released alongside the Budget are realistic?

The Prime Minister: The spending assumptions released by the OBR?

Mel Stride: The assumptions implicit in the OBR's forecast, which was released at the time of the Budget. Are those figures realistic?

The Prime Minister: Just remind me which particular figures you have in mind, Mel.

Mel Stride: The departmental and capital expenditure; the standard figures that go into the fiscal outlook forecast that the OBR produces alongside every major fiscal event, and certainly alongside the Budget.

The Prime Minister: I certainly think that the OBR is right to think that the public finances are under very considerable pressure as a result of covid. If you mean the £407 billion expenditure that the pandemic has necessitated, I was discussing that last night with the Chancellor and I would certainly agree with that.

Q65 **Mel Stride:** No, I am really referring to the forecast, which, as you know, forecasts out for the next five years. There are assumptions made as to what the Government will be spending in each one of those years.

The Prime Minister: On that point, I think what the OBR has been suggesting is that, obviously, things are very tough, and spending has



been necessarily very extensive, but the fiscal repair measures that Rishi took in the Budget, are set to work over the medium term.

- Q66 **Mel Stride:** When you say the OBR's figures, Prime Minister, they are the OBR's figures in the sense that they appear in the forecast, but they are, of course, figures provided by the Treasury. I guess my question is: are you comfortable with the Government's assumptions as to the spending levels that are expected over the coming years?

The Prime Minister: Yes. Am I comfortable with it? I wish we were not in this position; I wish we didn't have to firehose so much money at covid to put out the conflagration, but I think the Chancellor's Budget was extremely good and has put us back on a sustainable path.

- Q67 **Mel Stride:** The reason I raise that, Prime Minister, is that there are many economists who believe that the figures on spending within that forecast are quite unrealistic. For example, Paul Johnson of the IFS has offered 10 to one against the spending assumptions being met. That is because there are a lot of costs that one can anticipate coming down the line that are not captured within the figures that the Treasury provided to the OBR.

We have touched on a number of those areas in the discussion this afternoon. One thinks of social care commitments, for example, that were not baked into the Budget. There is no explicit provision for spending on annual vaccinations, beyond the current programme. We have got Test and Trace, which we have discussed this afternoon. There is a huge backlog in our hospitals, nurses' pay and all the children who, one presumes, will need more resource if they are to catch up on lost learning. There could perhaps be pressure for yet further universal credit uplift.

Doesn't that leave you feeling slightly queasy about the assumptions on spending that the Government are operating to, given their critical importance in terms of the actions that we take in support of the public finances?

The Prime Minister: These were the figures that the Treasury put out and the OBR recorded. I am not going to make predictions now about future Budgets and spending reviews. If we continue with the road map to freedom in the way that we are—and, as I said yesterday, there is no sign in the data that causes me at this stage to believe that we are going to have to deviate from that road map to freedom—I believe our chances of a strong recovery are very good.

- Q68 **Mel Stride:** How do you square that with saying, a little while ago, that you remain committed to resolving the social care crisis? We know there is no money in those forecasts to take that into account. Those two things, it seems to me, don't really square.

If we accept your statement that you do have confidence in those numbers, does that mean taxation, as a total level of the tax burden in the UK, will be expected not to rise? Can you make a commitment this afternoon that we shouldn't expect the tax burden—already the highest



HOUSE OF COMMONS

since Roy Jenkins was Chancellor in the 1960s—to rise, on the basis of your confidence in those figures at the moment?

The Prime Minister: I strongly believe in a low-tax Government, and I am a low-tax Conservative. That is the best way forward for our country. As we go forward, we are going to want to be as dynamic and competitive as we can possibly be. Having the right fiscal framework is vital for that.

Even the increase in corporation tax does not come in for two years, and the rate is still the lowest in the G7. It is preceded by a super deduction for capital investment for business investment, which is incredibly attractive, and I hope will give people confidence and get our economy moving.

I don't think you should necessarily draw the conclusion from what is in the OBR numbers about spending that we won't have the room to make the profound changes on social care that Jeremy and I discussed earlier.

Q69 **Mel Stride:** Do you think those changes would not require any uplift in those numbers for spending? They are not captured in there at the moment, and that is quite a large bill. Can I just ask one final question about the super deduction?

Chair: Very briefly.

Mel Stride: The super deduction lasts for two years, as we know. Thereafter, companies that currently have chronically low levels of investment, not just because of the pandemic but because we have had an historical situation, will then go into a situation where that support is not there and corporation tax is rising quite significantly. What is it, after the super deduction has gone through in that couple of years, that will be there from the Government to support corporates investing further?

The Prime Minister: You have a world now in which business rates are unprecedentedly low. VAT has been cut. As you know, Mel, because you have been following this throughout, there is huge support through CBILS, through furlough and through all the instruments that the Government has used. Plus you have now got a super deduction for investment, to say nothing of the kickstart funding for hiring people—a huge package to get the economy moving. The purpose is to trigger confidence, growth and investment, and a virtuous circle.

Mel Stride: Prime Minister, thank you.

Chair: We now move to Huw Merriman, the Chair of the Transport Committee.

Huw Merriman: *[Inaudible.]*

Chair: We cannot hear Huw Merriman.

The Prime Minister: Huw, you need to unmute.

Chair: Can we come back to you, Huw? Can we sort out his sound?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: By the looks of it, he is in Portcullis House, just down the road. He could literally walk in here, Bernard. We could do this incredible thing called actual propinquity. It's a revolutionary concept. In a covid-secure way, Huw could come and sit here.

Chair: Yes, I agree with that. Huw, if you want to abandon your workstation and come down here, we will sort it out that way.

The Prime Minister: Brilliant!

Chair: We shall move to Julian Knight. I hope we can hear you, Julian.

Q70 **Julian Knight:** Thank you, Chair. It would take me a lot longer to walk from Solihull to Portcullis House.

The digital, culture, media and sport sectors, as no doubt you are aware, Prime Minister, are worth nearly a quarter of the UK economy. Yet post Brexit, people in these sectors are being asked to pay uneconomic visa fees just to work overseas in the EU. They cannot transport their instruments or their gear, and they are already being overlooked for work in favour of those who have EU passports. Why were these sectors allowed to suffer what is in effect a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: Julian, first of all I want to say how strongly I share your frustration and the frustration of that sector. I totally share the frustration of the sector. This is a massively important part of our economy. It contributes many, many tens of billions of pounds in tax revenue and employment, to the general joy and productivity of the nation. It is hugely important. It is also a massive export industry, so we must fix this.

The answer is, I am afraid, that in the course of the negotiations the EU as a whole did not give us the deal that we wanted on this issue, although of course we are not placing any restrictions on people coming to the UK. We are very happy to welcome performers from around the world. That will always be part of our global Britain approach.

We do have some time because, obviously, given what we have been discussing earlier, there is not a great hubbub of travelling musicians and theatre companies and so on doing gigs around the rest of Europe. That has been on hold for a while.

We are working flat out bilaterally with each individual Government, and some of them—as I am sure you know, Julian, because you know a lot about this—are much, much better and more forward-leaning than others. With some of them, it has been absolutely fine; with others, we still have progress to make.

One of the reasons why I invited Nick Hytner to help us in this sector is so that we can get ready for a proper return to our cultural life in the autumn in the way that everybody would want.

Q71 **Julian Knight:** Thank you for those encouraging words, Prime Minister. What the DCMS sectors would like to hear from you is a pledge to get this



HOUSE OF COMMONS

sorted. We are already a quarter of the way through the year and, as such, no bilateral talks have taken place. When will those talks take place, and who will lead them on our side?

The Prime Minister: Actually, there are plenty of conversations already happening at national capital levels between the UK and our partners. David Frost—Lord Frost—is in overall charge of making this happen. One of the things we are looking at doing is—we have got £1.57 billion, as you know, that we have put into the sector to support it in all sorts of ways, and we will want to be helping in the meantime with some of that funding.

Q72 **Julian Knight:** I am glad you mentioned Lord Frost, because he has now declined two invitations to appear before my Committee. Perhaps you could have a gentle word.

The Prime Minister: I will.

Q73 **Julian Knight:** As I understand it, it is the heads of mission who will be undertaking the first stage of the bilateral talks. That, I think, will take too long. Will you consider short-circuiting this and getting our Ministers negotiating with Ministers from Spain, Italy and Greece, which seem to be the most recalcitrant nations in terms of visa access?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I am passionate about this. I think it was in 1620 that the group called the English comedians performed Hamlet in German, as far as I can remember. This is something that has been going on for hundreds of years, and we must get it properly ironed out. It is a two-way street, and we need to make sure that we get this thing totally sorted out and that our greatest cultural exports can continue to flourish.

Q74 **Julian Knight:** Thank you. One final question, Chair, if I may, on covid insurance for festivals. Every year there are 975 festivals in the UK—from Glastonbury, of course, to the Asparagus Festival in Worcestershire. But without limited Government-backed covid cancellation insurance, we risk throwing away the economic advantages from our brilliant vaccine programme. Prime Minister, will you back a covid-secure summer of fun rather than condemning us to a summer of none?

The Prime Minister: I mentioned the work that Nick Hytner is leading for us. We are looking at ways in which we can make this happen. Oliver Dowden, the DCMS Secretary, is clearly leading on this, and he has done a huge amount of work on trying to get the sector ready.

One thing that I do not want to see is people unwilling to take risks on productions, performances and events because they are thinking about what happened last year when, as we have discussed, we thought we could get things open and then, sadly, because of the way the pandemic went, we could not move forward. Remember, we had a huge effort on lateral flow testing to try to move things forward.

To get something ready for the autumn—or the Christmas season, even, now—you have to do the rehearsals, get the scenery and all that stuff, and it takes a huge amount of time, preparation and expense. I totally get that. That is why we are looking at what we can do to top-slice some of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the £1.57 billion to see if we can be useful in that way. There are difficulties with this whole business of indemnifying the entire sector, as I am sure you will appreciate, and as I am sure Mel would appreciate, but that is what we are looking at.

Q75 **Julian Knight:** I would not suggest indemnifying the whole sector, but a date in time limited only to the costs incurred. I think there is a way forward with this, Prime Minister, but at the moment I have to say we are not being listened to. We have really serious proposals on this. Hopefully, you will take that back.

The Prime Minister: Okay. I would love to—love to.

Q76 **Chair:** I think that was a point and not a question. But may I, as a vice-chairman of the all-party music group, reinforce a very strong feeling in music and the performing arts that we have been slow on the uptake of the seriousness of the impact of Brexit on touring musicians and performers? It has looked as though we have not been prepared to listen.

I have asked Oliver Dowden, the Secretary of State, to host a Zoom call of people who are practitioners on the frontline. Can I invoke your support for this initiative of listening and gathering intelligence?

The Prime Minister: Yes. Sir Bernard, I can think of nothing finer than to make sure you can lead a choir of Brexiteers on a tour of the continent.

Q77 **Chair:** No, they are not Brexiteers! Also, can I add Portugal to the list? Many of the issues are very much confined to certain countries of concern and it is not due to any malevolence of those countries. It is the bedding down of new procedures and practices that are unfamiliar to the officials in those countries.

The Prime Minister: That is entirely right.

Q78 **Chair:** Can I ask you to not only advise Lord Frost to attend the DCMS Select Committee to address these matters, but ensure that a Foreign Office Minister is going to take the fight through the embassies into campaigns in the individual countries? It needs to be addressed country by country, otherwise we will make very slow progress.

The Prime Minister: It does. This is one of those opportunities for strong bilateral engagement.

Chair: Thank you very much, Prime Minister, for those assurances. We now go to Huw Merriman, who has been allowed to join us in person for his questions about transport.

Q79 **Huw Merriman:** Prime Minister, thank you for unlocking me and inviting me down to the room—technology broke down.

I want to ask about international travel. You said to this Committee, and indeed to the public yesterday, that on 5 April you will have more to say. Is 5 April the day when the global travel taskforce framework will be known to the public?

The Prime Minister: That is right.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q80 Huw Merriman: With that, are we likely to see a framework that just sets out the criteria, or will it be known which country goes into which criteria by 5 April?

The Prime Minister: I think, Huw, with great respect, you are probably going to have to wait until 5 April to see the details. The hope is that we can get people moving again by 17 May, by step three, in the way that I have set out on the roadmap. We will have to see where we get to, where other countries get to, and what the data is telling us.

Q81 Huw Merriman: That is great news, because that is a week earlier than when we thought the taskforce would publish. Can I push you— does that mean it might be a week earlier that people are able to start flying and travelling again?

The Prime Minister: We are sticking to the road map.

Q82 Huw Merriman: So I cannot push you earlier than 17 May?

The Prime Minister: The reason for that, and I am sure the Committee knows this backwards, is the simple epidemiological reason. A five-week interval is a sensible one—it gives you a chance to assess the impact of the previous changes. It will be five weeks on since the opening on April 12 of non-essential retail, coupled with the impact of schools, and everything else. We will need to see what that has done.

Q83 Huw Merriman: I understand, and it is great news that we will hear a week earlier in terms of that news.

Can I ask you where we are on discussions with other international leaders? Obviously, every plane that leaves the UK will need to land in another country. For example, have you had conversations with President Biden as to our ability to restart UK-US flying again at the time when we are ready to fly?

The Prime Minister: We are discussing the whole time, and I know that Grant—the Transport Secretary—is discussing the whole time with colleagues around the world on when we can get things moving. All of us are looking at the pandemic and when it is sensible to do so.

Q84 Huw Merriman: In terms of prioritising those conversations—and I am not asking you to give information—are you looking, as we are, at the countries that are ahead of the game with vaccination roll-out? Again, the US is a country that seems to have marched forward in the way that the UK has, so, in terms of those conversations, have we some form of agreed standard on travelling?

You have said before that vaccination certificates, or passports, may be an inevitability. Have we had those conversations about what the framework would be in terms of rules?

The Prime Minister: I don't think there has been an international concordat on vaccination passports, but there is no doubt that there is a growing global consensus that, for the purposes of aviation, evidence of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

vaccination, or immunity, that you have had the disease or that you have taken a negative test, will all be valuable.

- Q85 **Huw Merriman:** Do you regard the vaccination certification as a commercial necessity and one that Government would not stand in the way of if that was the way to unlock people's ability to fly again?

The Prime Minister: There is a hierarchy between mandating something and permitting it, or forbidding it. I think some areas and particular sectors, as we were talking about earlier on, were vulnerable. Elderly people are being cared for. There may be some need for mandation and some need for a more permissive approach. All that will be set out in due course.

- Q86 **Huw Merriman:** Okay. Can I just ask you another question? It may well be the case due to what is going on in Europe and elsewhere that there are certain parts of the transportation system that cannot operate as other parts of the economy can by 22 June. If there are Government-imposed barriers to travel, domestically and internationally, would you be willing to look again at a sector-based compensation scheme to ensure that those organisations can stay in business if they cannot do business?

The Prime Minister: Do you mean like aviation?

Huw Merriman: Aviation, for example, but we also had the coaches sector in this morning, and they have been particularly impacted as well.

The Prime Minister: Yes, they have. Aviation we have supported with about £7 billion already. We are going to continue to have issues that we will have to deal with in the aviation sector for a long time to come. The coach industry we are supporting in all sorts of ways, not least in buying lots of green buses, although perhaps they are not so useful in the actual coach sector. But the best thing for all those sectors is to get us all moving again, and that depends on the roll-out of the vaccine and defeating the virus.

- Q87 **Huw Merriman:** One last question, if I may, Chair. It almost seems to be the case now that "going abroad on holiday" is a dirty word. That is an absolute tragedy, given that you yourself are a great internationalist and that we have always ruled the waves in terms of exploring abroad. How do we get this market opened up again, and how do we get people to look beyond these shores?

The Prime Minister: Do not underestimate the natural wanderlust, spirit of inquiry, general dynamism of the British people, that has served us for hundreds and hundreds of years. As soon as people feel it is safe, you will see a miraculous change in the mood and in what happens. That is what this is all about. We are getting there, as I say, step by step, jab by jab. We are not there yet, but I will be saying more on 5 April and then on 12 April. We will do what we can.

- Q88 **Huw Merriman:** You just unlocked me from my room so I could come down here. Are you minded to unlock yourself and give yourself a foreign holiday over summer, as well as supporting domestic holidays?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: I think that, whatever I do, I will be making sure to tell the British public what I think is safe and sensible. I certainly won't be doing anything other than that.

Huw Merriman: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. If you can indulge us for just another 10 minutes, the Chair of the Procedure Committee, Karen Bradley, would like to ask about lifting covid restrictions in Parliament to restore the effectiveness of Parliament.

Q89 **Karen Bradley:** Thank you very much, Sir Bernard. Prime Minister, we have just seen a real example of the hybrid Parliament working, where we have had to have physical participation from Mr Merriman rather than virtual. One thing we can say about Westminster is that the House of Commons has been able to operate and has sat throughout the whole of the pandemic, unlike many other national Parliaments around the world. That is thanks to the innovation of the digital team and the House staff, who have been able to make this happen. Of course, compromises have been required of them. Prime Minister, I am curious what your view is of how Parliament has operated in the last 12 months.

The Prime Minister: I think it has been heroic, actually. The staff of the House of Commons have done an absolutely unbelievable job. Don't forget that many of them can work in professions, looking at how the pandemic works, that we would think of as quite high risk. They have to come into regular contact with large numbers of different people, in close proximity, and we have seen the effects on some professions of the disease. So I thank them very, very much for what they have done. They have kept going. My broad instinct is that the public would like us, as parliamentarians, to be returning to life pretty much as normal, *pari passu*, at the same pace as everybody else, and I think that is what we should go for.

Q90 **Karen Bradley:** Can I join you in thanking the staff of the Commons? We know we have lost some very special members of staff over the last 12 months, and we should all remember that, and the work that they do. You talked about staying in step with the road map out of lockdown for Parliament. Some colleagues would like to go faster; some colleagues think that the House of Commons should show leadership, and that perhaps things like social distancing shouldn't apply in the House of Commons Chamber when it does it apply to the rest of the country. What's your view?

The Prime Minister: My instinct is the one I just mentioned, Karen. I would be inclined to support an approach that is adopted everywhere. The House of Commons should be like any other part of the UK. We should be meeting and mingling when it's safe to do so, and when the science says that that's okay.

Q91 **Karen Bradley:** Thank you. If I could bring us on to when we are back to some form of normality, the attrition rate for female MPs serving in the House of Commons is far worse than for male MPs. We have got some



HOUSE OF COMMONS

figures from the House of Commons Library that indicate that women MPs serve, on average, one parliamentary term less than their male counterparts. There may be many reasons for that, but one of them might well be the procedures of the House of Commons. I wonder, based on our experiences and some of the things we have done over the last 12 months, and also on your experience as a parliamentarian: are there any procedural changes you would like to see that we could look at that might mean that more women were able to make a successful career in Parliament?

The Prime Minister: I do, actually, think that we need to harvest the best things; this has been a terrible pandemic, and it has been an appalling year, but we have learned to do some things quite well. I think that technology has definitely been our friend. This is something that the Government doesn't dictate at all; it is for the Commons, MPs and the Speaker to work out how to do it. But where there are improvements that can be made, particularly family-friendly improvements, I'd be on for that. I think the way the Commons works has improved quite a lot even in my time here, and that's been to the good. I think it has helped us get more female MPs, but we've got to realise that there are still very considerable barriers. Some of the deterrent that female MPs face is absolutely appalling. We have discussed the online trolling and the abuse. Anything we can do to make things easier and more family-friendly is something that it would be sensible for the Speaker and his team to look at.

Q92 **Karen Bradley:** Are there any particular innovations you would perhaps like to see continue that we have tried during the course of the pandemic? I am thinking about the way we are voting, or maybe some virtual participation.

The Prime Minister: I wouldn't want to commit to any particular change, Karen. I just think that generally the Speaker and the Commons together should be looking seriously at the general benefits of remote debate and the ways we have been able to do things differently. Sometimes it's worked and sometimes it's been less successful, and I have no doubt at all, speaking entirely personally, that I want the Chamber to be full again. I want people to have a sense that they can see the sentiment expressed in the room, understand where the debate is going by the sea anemone movement on the Benches, see how the argument is working and hear the acclaim or abuse. I think that's very important; we need to learn directly from each other. I think that probably it's a good idea for colleagues to be able to mingle again in the Lobbies. I know it's incredibly old-fashioned, but in so far as we possibly can, I think that voting as a communal act together has immense benefits. It is not just pressing a button; you really have to commit to and think about it. You have to be able to justify what you are doing to your friends, your colleagues and your Whips as you go around these ancient buildings. I hope I do not sound like a crazed traditionalist when I say that I see merit in that. But there will be things that we can do differently and better. I really wouldn't want to be too prescriptive about that. A lot of people will have spent a lot of time looking at what has worked and at what hasn't worked, and I encourage them to harvest the best.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q93 **Karen Bradley:** One final point. You said, Prime Minister, that this is a matter for the House, but obviously it is for the Government to provide time for debates on these matters and for the House then to be able to make a decision. Can you commit to giving some time for that debate?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that that is going to be a necessity. We are going to have to look at ways of improving our proceedings, making them more family-friendly. I have no doubt about that.

Karen Bradley: Thank you.

Q94 **Chair:** Prime Minister—this is my personal view, as someone who is also committed to a 50:50 Parliament—I very much welcome your open mind on these matters. May I press you, in particular, on the proxy voting issue, which has been a great help to people who have caring responsibilities, who are of course mostly women? If we went back to the pre-covid situation, we would in fact be re-invoking an indirectly discriminatory regime. I hope—perhaps you can just confirm this—that you have an open mind on the question as to whether additional proxy votes could be available for people with caring responsibilities.

The Prime Minister: I certainly think we need to be looking at measures that are family-friendly. I have said what I have said about the value of voting together, but I am sure that all MPs get that point. The point you make is also a very good one.

Q95 **Chair:** Like you, I am a traditionalist, and the last thing I want is Ministers to have proxy votes, so that they never see the rest of the Members. That is very important.

The Prime Minister: Exactly.

Q96 **Chair:** May I very briefly return to the COP26 question? It is one of the top priorities of the Government in this calendar year. We have arranged for Alok Sharma, the President-designate, to appear before the different Select Committees that have an interest in this, but our concern is that this does not yet look like the same consuming priority for the Government as other policies. What can you do to ensure that all Departments are engaged, that all efforts are being made to secure the agreement of 190 countries and that it engages domestic policy as well?

The Prime Minister: Unless I specifically tell you otherwise, I want you to know that I am engaged in some kind of COP conversation virtually every day. That probably goes for every other Secretary of State; certainly, in many Departments, there will be Ministers who spend a lot of time every week now thinking about issues to do with our green industrial revolution, the 10-point plan, tackling climate change and the COP summit. It is a big, big cross-governmental effort. It is being led by Alok, but it is certainly something that we are gripping across Whitehall.

Q97 **Chair:** You chair the Climate Action Strategy Committee, a Cabinet Committee. How often should it be meeting?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: That is one forum. It hasn't, to be frank, met a great deal, because we have been doing a lot of ad hoc meetings. That is how it has been working out. I have been meeting colleagues pretty continuously over the last few months, and it will intensify. The question now, really, is to make sure that we can have a COP that is physical. To get back to the question that Karen was talking about, it would be a wonderful thing if, by November, the UK can lead the world in all sorts of things and actually have a summit that is a big global summit where everyone turns up, and where everyone turns up without fear.

Chair: Prime Minister, thank you very much. You have given us a great deal of time, and we have covered a lot of ground. We are looking forward to seeing you towards the end of the summer term and then again in the autumn. I am very grateful for the time that you give this Committee. It is of great help to the work of the Select Committees.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Sir Bernard.