



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Responsibilities of the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, HC 1392

Tuesday 11 May 2021

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Sarah Atherton; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar.

Questions 1-75

Witnesses

[I](#): Johnny Mercer MP.

Examination of witnesses

Witness: Johnny Mercer.

Chair: Welcome to this Defence Select Committee hearing on Tuesday 11 May 2021. It is a one-off session with the former Minister for Defence People and Veterans. I very much welcome Johnny Mercer, Member of Parliament for Plymouth, Moor View. Before we begin, I need to make two points of clarification. We will be discussing cases in Northern Ireland, but we cannot refer in detail to any pending cases. There are about half a dozen and we should refrain from referring to those in any detail. Anybody who has served in Northern Ireland would be wise to make a declaration at this point, which I do as a former officer in Northern Ireland. I acknowledge that Richard Drax and Stuart Anderson also served. That is for the record.

Mr Mercer, thank you for joining us this afternoon. We have lots to get through. This is very pertinent as well, given the fact that references were made to what is going on in Northern Ireland in the Queen's Speech. I invite Stuart Anderson to open up the questions.

Q1 **Stuart Anderson:** Johnny, can you set out for us how you think the Government have done so far in fulfilling their manifesto pledge to veterans?

Johnny Mercer: I think it is clear that under this Prime Minister there is a renewed focus on veterans, which I very much welcome. It is why I supported him, and I believe that he, as an individual, is deeply committed to this agenda. Delivering on that, so that it is not about announcements and what we pour into the top of the machine, but what it feels like to be a veteran in this country today, still has quite a long way to go. For me, the totemic symbol of that is what has gone on over the past few weeks.

We have made progress—you cannot dispute that—but for me the progress was clearly far too slow. Working for Government was very difficult; getting this agenda anywhere was very difficult. I was rarely allowed to speak about it in the media and things like that, which is hard when you have got 2.2 million veterans in this country who are looking at you to deliver on the commitment for the Prime Minister. It was difficult but we have made some progress, though nowhere near what I would have liked to have done as a Minister in the Government.

Q2 **Stuart Anderson:** Can I just join a few of those dots? You said that you believed the Prime Minister is committed to supporting veterans, then you talked about the trouble of working within Government. My question is, how effective have the Government been, not just the Prime Minister?

Johnny Mercer: Pretty poor all round, to be honest. My existence was marked by a lot of engagement with the veteran community, whether that is those who have just left, of our generation, or those who left many years ago, and not only with them but their families.



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As an example, people know that I really wanted to tackle veteran suicide, and I would try to meet the families and next of kin of everybody who took their own lives. I wanted to understand whether there was any moment when we could or should have intervened in that individual's life to prevent that. Often the answer was no.

Suicide is deeply complex, but one of the biggest challenges was when individuals who took their lives had made a video before they did, saying that there was no help available. I would go to their area and look for the help, and it was available. The big issue was getting that message out.

I would share that with No. 10 and the people around the Prime Minister. I would want to go and talk about that, so that we could get to a stage where people do not think there is no help available and take their lives. I was never allowed to do that, to a point where, after seeing one family, it had such an effect on me that I grabbed a journalist and went to a local hotel and gave an interview, because I thought it was so important to get the message out about what help is available for veterans.

When you are doing that, certainly in Government, it is very lonely and difficult, and you are very isolated. As far as I am concerned, we should work as a team. This is not my hobby horse; this is the nation's duty to her veterans. I know it is the Prime Minister's expectation that we deliver that. Clearly, between myself and the Prime Minister, there was quite a contested space that I found difficult to win.

Q3 **Stuart Anderson:** Thank you for the honesty. Has the Office for Veterans' Affairs made a difference since its formation?

Johnny Mercer: The concept of the Office for Veterans' Affairs undoubtedly is a step change in what we do for veterans' care in this country, but it has to be done in the correct way. We cannot just have an Office for Veterans' Affairs release a press release and then not do anything about it.

You have to empower it properly; it has to have the correct number of people and budget and the correct political horsepower from the Prime Minister. It cannot just be bolted on to the most junior Minister in the Ministry of Defence. Essentially, you are looking to work cross-party, cross-Government, where you are dealing with Secretaries of State—whether its Grant Shapps and the veterans railcard or Robert Jenrick at MHCLG. Not only that, but with the devolved authorities as well. If you are the most junior Minister in defence and it is seen as a bit of a tokenistic effort, that job is going to be nigh on impossible.

Q4 **Stuart Anderson:** May I come in? You said, "If it is seen as a tokenistic effort". Do you think it was a tokenistic effort?

Johnny Mercer: No, I think there was a genuine ambition from this Prime Minister to get veterans' care right. I have had a lot of criticism for my support of the Prime Minister, but it is my honest view that he gets this agenda and wants to deliver on it. We have had covid, Brexit and all these things, and he is an incredibly busy man, but he should expect his



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Ministers to operate within that lane of delivering his promises to our veterans.

Q5 Stuart Anderson: Was the OVA properly funded, or did it have enough funding?

Johnny Mercer: Funding in the OVA is not a straightforward conversation. The OVA is not a delivery mechanism, it is about pulling together all the different strands. For example, Op Courage in the NHS has £16 million, rising to £22 million in five years' time, and you could argue that that is veterans' funding from the OVA.

The OVA is there to pull together all the strands of Government, to encourage the third sector—which has delivered all this care for so long—and actually make it work for the veterans. It does not need a huge budget to do that; it does not need a huge workforce or a huge Department. It does need the drive and authority to deliver it on the Prime Minister's behalf, and it certainly did not have that. I hope that that changes in the weeks ahead.

Q6 Stuart Anderson: What was your biggest ask within the OVA? If you were still the Minister, what would be the biggest thing you would ask for to help the OVA really fulfil its task? I am not talking about Northern Ireland or anything, we will come on to that in a minute.

Johnny Mercer: Just for it to be correctly politically prioritised. When I left, we still did not have an office. We had been through four spending saving rounds already: it was extraordinary. At one stage, all the staff had been taken and I had no idea about it: it was just me and David Richmond left. It took me two years to get a meeting with the Prime Minister.

If you are delivering a key manifesto promise—not only that, but the difficult stuff around the overseas Bill and things like that—you have just got no chance of getting off the starting block.

Q7 Richard Drax: In the last five minutes you have explained the difficulties you had and talked about how you were rebuffed at every single turn. I am not quite sure that I am personally satisfied as to why the Prime Minister makes a pledge, but then our own Government go to this length to not deliver for our brave men and women who are so essential, so important and do so much for our country. I just do not understand why you have this huge difficulty.

Johnny Mercer: Largely, Richard, because everybody understands that we want to look after our veterans. Everybody wants to do that. You will not find an MP in this place who does not want to do that. What it actually requires, however, is beyond that—a really granular, detailed understanding of, for example, what is there at the moment? How do the charities interact? How do we negotiate mental health contracts with the NHS? How do we deliver things like the veterans railcard?

That requires another level of attention to detail that brings it into a strata. Ultimately, people were not prepared to pay it the attention it deserves.



Q8 Richard Drax: On mental health, for example, you were told you could not go out and explain it. Why?

Johnny Mercer: Yes, it was extraordinary. I will be honest with you. In that case, an individual—and I will be very clear that I am not going after individuals, but I will tell you the truth of how the system works—a senior individual in No 10 phoned me up and said, “You are not to do the Today programme talking about veterans’ mental health.”

I think I recall saying to him, “Has the Prime Minister specifically said that to you?”, because I didn’t believe he would say that. He said that the Prime Minister specifically told him I was not to do that tomorrow. I spoke to the Prime Minister and he had made no such pledge at all.

When you are operating in an environment where advisers—unelected advisers, ironically—I never profess to be the ark of all knowledge on the economy or green policies, but I don’t think you will find many people in this place who know more about veterans’ policies than myself. All I wanted to do was deliver that in a sensible way, cognisant all the time of covid and Brexit, but advisers would say that it was not, politically, the right thing to do; that it was not a political priority. I would think to myself that that is not how I understood it, but as a junior Minister you have no chance.

The way the system is set up, you have the Secretary of State and the SPADs, and everyone hovers around them and everything is done on their terms, so as a junior Minister you have absolutely no chance, which I think is a shame, because people like me just want to be part of a team that is delivering this stuff. I do not want to be constantly looking at my boss and trying to get his job or anything like that. I actually just want to deliver this stuff and then go home and spend time with my family, like anyone else who goes to work. However, it was a really challenging time. When I did speak up, I got in a fair amount of trouble, I think it is fair to say.

Q9 John Spellar: Can we be a bit clearer on that? Are you saying that it was the civil service or the military chain of command that was blocking you, or the fringe special advisers within the Department and No. 10? Certainly with the former, you would have been able to say, “I have been appointed by the Prime Minister as a Minister of the Crown and this is the mandate I am working on from the Prime Minister, and we are going to go ahead with this.”

Johnny Mercer: In my experience, the civil servants were extraordinarily flexible, capable and determined and looked after me very well. They would never say this in public, but they absolutely 100% aligned to my views. We could not understand why, for example, having met a grieving widow and her nine-year-old son, if we were offered a spot to speak in the media about what is available to stop people taking their own lives, it did not happen.

I am afraid that special advisers—in the round; there are one or two very good ones—go from Department to Department and from the communications industry into something else. If there was a real skill set



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there, that would be really helpful, because there is no way the Minister can know and do everything. The idea that a special adviser with absolutely no background in the military and who has never won anything in politics or anything like that can come and tell me what they think is the best political route through for, for example, the overseas Bill is ridiculous. Any private company would just fall over if you have unqualified people giving pretty important advice.

There are some great special advisers who do some really important work, but it is all a balance, and if it gets out of balance and they are controlling everything, when they do not knock on doors and they do not know what it takes to be elected, I am afraid that the system will not work as it should and you end up not delivering what you said you would.

- Q10 John Spellar:** In a way, in order to resolve that, is it not incumbent on Ministers, basically, to say that the Prime Minister has the ultimate say, and absent his ringing you up to tell you not to—or if he is extremely busy, if he names a senior person; in our operation, I would have said Jonathan Powell or Alastair Campbell, whom I understood spoke for the Prime Minister—you will go ahead and do it?

Johnny Mercer: The traditional argument I had is that they would always say that No. 10 said no.

John Spellar: But without a voice?

Johnny Mercer: Well I would then ask who in No. 10 because I would then try to go after them. They would just say No. 10, and I would be like, “What, like the door? The door says no?” You literally could not get beyond that.

When I was dealing with these policies, we hit some really tough times, whether that was Combat Stress reorganising, the overseas Bill or the spike in veteran suicide in January 2019. On any of these issues, the country expects her elected Ministers to go out and face these issues down. It is not all about saying good things from the Dispatch Box. You need to tackle the difficult stuff and provide leadership on these issues. At every stage, that was blocked.

I had that on one side, and then 2.2 million veterans in this country, who saw me finally get into government and deliver an OVA, with this huge expectation, and then in the middle was literally just me. That pressure was pretty overwhelming—my wife wanted me to leave Government some time ago.

- Q11 John Spellar:** I have one final question. Are we possibly seeing a divergence in policy between what you describe as the views of the Ministry of Defence civil service and the broader Whitehall complex, who might take a different view from the MOD? That is not unknown.

Johnny Mercer: Can you expand on that?

John Spellar: Yes. In other words, the Treasury and the Cabinet Office may take a different view from the Ministry of Defence, who actually have



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to engage with the problem, and therefore this is a vehicle by which they are exerting their view.

Johnny Mercer: What I found interesting—look, I would be the first to accept that I didn't take my sacking particularly well. But what I found—that would be okay if everybody told the truth. I went around the Department, from the Secretary of State downwards, trying to find out who arrived at this figure of 72,000 in the Army, and everyone blamed each other. Private enterprises cannot operate like that. If you are going to make difficult decisions, you have got to own it and see it through. I tried for a long time to find out, because my personal view was that it is very difficult to make a promise at election time about numbers and then, a year and a half later, very clearly breach that promise. Politically, that is very difficult.

On the doctrine side of it, of course we can do more with less, and there is some brilliant stuff in that IR that the Secretary of State worked really hard on. But yes, going around to try to find that—you're right: yes, of course there is divergence of thinking. I tried to find out from Treasury Ministers and officials who arrived at this number, and from people in the Army and from Ministers in my Department, and literally no one could give me a straightforward answer. It is quite difficult to operate in an environment like that.

Q12 **Mr Francois:** Mr Mercer, you talked about the Prime Minister being fully behind the veterans agenda. I think we would probably agree with that. But let me ask a specific question. In the summer of 2020, when he was standing for the leadership of the Conservative party and was—

Johnny Mercer: It was 2019 when he was standing for the leadership.

Mr Francois: Sorry, yes, when he was in a run-off against another candidate; you're quite right. He published a double-page spread in, I think, *The Sun*, where he signed the veterans pledge. Among other things, he promised in that pledge to bring in legislation by the next general election that would protect veterans, including Northern Ireland veterans. Obviously, you mentioned Brexit and the pandemic. Extraordinary circumstances led to that election and what followed. Do you believe that the Prime Minister is still committed to the pledge that he signed in *The Sun*?

Johnny Mercer: He is committed to it, but it has not been delivered. This is not my opinion; it is in black and white. The pledge is very clear, in black and white, and we have not delivered that in black and white. The pledge, from the start, didn't really get off the starting blocks. Yes, we legislated with the overseas Bill, but by the end of that process, I'm afraid—we can talk about that at another time, but it became nothing like it was designed to be and we lost complete control of it. The Veterans Minister in every other Five Eyes country sits in the Cabinet, where he can deal with other Cabinet colleagues and actually deliver policy. That was part of the veterans pledge. Legislation to protect servicemen in Northern Ireland was part of the veterans pledge, and we have not delivered on those things.



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Look, I think he is committed to these things. I think there was strong and immediate pushback to the Prime Minister, when he signed that pledge, from people around him—well, I know that there was, and I know there was a strong pushback against me as well.

Q13 **Mr Francois:** Are you at liberty to say who pushed back?

Johnny Mercer: No, Mark, I am afraid I am not. I am very clear that I want to achieve an objective in this policy space. I absolutely have no axe to grind or personal battles to fight with anybody. I know I have been critical, but I have never gone after an individual, because I just want the system to work and deliver for veterans.

Mr Francois: We are going to come back to the Queen's Speech in a few minutes, so we will leave it there for the moment, but I assure you that we will return to that.

Johnny Mercer: Good.

Q14 **Chair:** I would like to pursue that a bit further. You are aware that I did your job before you.

Johnny Mercer: I am aware of that.

Mr Francois: And I did it before him.

Q15 **Chair:** The challenge is how we look after our veterans, who have served their country well, having been put into situations that civilians cannot necessarily directly relate to. The majority of them go there and honour the Geneva convention. Absolutely, those who don't must be held to account, but in my time I could not find any legal instrument that would allow us to protect those veterans and still abide by human rights law, by the Good Friday agreement and by the legislative process that is followed in the Northern Ireland Assembly, which would require any new legislation to have the support of Sinn Féin. They simply would not tolerate us supporting one part of society—namely, veterans—without it being equal to the civilians who were also involved in the troubles.

Yet in December 2019, in the general election build-up, on Armistice Day, we made a pledge to say that we would solve this. I do not disagree with the passion that you articulate, and the Prime Minister wanting to get this resolved. Would you now agree that he was badly advised to say that this could be done, and that is ultimately what has led to your resignation?

Johnny Mercer: No, I don't agree with that, Chair, because I think that there are options available in this space. My views have been persistently misrepresented by individuals who are trying to advance their aims. I respect that, but actually this Committee has probably done the best work on legacy. In the report that came out in 2018—

Chair: I don't want to get distracted. My question is very straightforward.

Johnny Mercer: Was he badly advised to sign that pledge?

Q16 **Chair:** Where is the legal instrument? We have now moved on from that



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in the Queen's Speech, which we will come on to shortly, but clearly we have now drawn a line to say that there wasn't any capability or legal avenue. I discussed this with the Attorney General and with the Northern Ireland Office at length, and nobody could find a way through this difficult avenue to plough a furrow that would be acceptable to all the players and stakeholders involved.

My concern is that the Conservative party made a pledge at the general election, telling all those veterans, whom you have mentioned a number of times, that we were going to solve this when, in my time, I could not do it. That is what I am trying to get to the bottom of.

Johnny Mercer: It is a completely fair question. I have heard commentary that I was naive to believe the Prime Minister and so on. People have worked in this space for many years, before me, and before yourself and others. There are policies available to do this. The report in 2018, for example, laid that out, and Richard Ekins in Policy Exchange. Tom Tugendhat wrote a paper in 2014. There are studies that have been done on this. While I accept what you are saying—that there was no legal mechanism that you could pull off the shelf and insert into Northern Ireland to sort it out—

Q17 **Chair:** Why was there an Overseas Operations Bill that excluded Northern Ireland?

Johnny Mercer: The Overseas Operations Bill excluded Northern Ireland because a decision was made by the Northern Ireland Office that it would not get any traction in Northern Ireland at all, but it was done with a very clear promise that they would walk down simultaneous legislation so that when we got to the end of that process we had not created two tiers of veterans: those who served as I did, and those who served in Northern Ireland who are older than me. Whatever we like and say, we sit here today in this country with two tiers of veterans: those who are protected by the Overseas Operations Bill and those who are not—those who served in Northern Ireland. That is unacceptable to any average citizen in this country.

Q18 **Chair:** If you as the Minister saw these things that are plug and play, ready to fit—Policy Exchange proposals, and so forth—how come you did not say, "Let's go. Let's run with that. Let's utilise that. It seems to work," because, as I say, others before you tried many mechanisms and could not find one that would succeed and get through the legislative channels and challenges that you would face?

Johnny Mercer: I think because to get this stuff through there are critical appointments where you need people who genuinely understand the intricacies of legacy and what you are going to do to deliver on it. They are generally at a more senior level than you and I were at when we were serving in the same position in the Ministry of Defence. If you are going to talk about legacy, you have to tread very, very carefully, very sympathetically and with a lot of grace. I had 16 meetings in Northern Ireland—



Q19 **Chair:** I do not doubt any of that. I am asking what the legislation was that you wanted to put there.

Johnny Mercer: I am getting to that point. If you can do that, and if you can engage with all these groups—the critical thing is to bring people in Northern Ireland with you—then these sorts of mechanisms can be brought in. That includes all the different groups I met last week: families, veterans and those across the political divide as well. A set of principles can be agreed by all of them, including, for example, a principle that we will prosecute people where new evidence exists, and that we will not have an amnesty because we do not want people going around committing murder. There are mechanisms in place. For example, the presumption not to prosecute, which Geoffrey Cox came up with when Attorney General, is effective. There is a qualified statute of limitations that is not a statute of limitations; it is a qualified statute of limitations. These sorts of mechanisms can be brought in, but there need to be people leading that policy who really understand it, who understand the detail and who have the sensitivity to bring everybody with them.

Chair: With respect, that was you and that was me in my time.

Johnny Mercer: No, it is not.

Q20 **Chair:** We are now seeing all of this being abandoned. Whatever we have seen before, what we heard today—and we can now move on to that—is the fact that the proposed statute of limitations is for everybody: the victims, and those in uniform and those not in uniform. That is the big difference between what has been proposed in the Queen’s Speech today and where we were before.

Johnny Mercer: Chair, I hate to correct you, but that is not correct. The words in today’s Queen’s Speech are almost identical to those last year and the year before that. They all talk about the equivalence across the scale of delivering for veterans, victims and survivors. So that is not correct.

Chair: I checked with the MOD before the beginning of this evidence session, and I was directed towards the trail on this in *The Times* at the weekend, which talked about the fact that there is going to be a new form of statute of limitations but it will not focus just on veterans, which would be unacceptable to Sinn Féin and therefore would not get through the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr Francois: Chair, we don’t know what it will say because we have not yet seen the Bill. Regardless of what has or has not been told to *The Times*, none of us will know what is actually proposed until we have seen the Bill. With respect, that is the whole point.

Chair: That is what I am putting to the former Minister.

Mr Francois: Just because someone in *The Times* has written something and they have had a briefing from a Spad does not mean that it is true.



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Chair: It was not a Spad. I will not be getting into a debate with you. I am here to question the former Minister to say that the direction I received from the Ministry of Defence is that this is the direction of travel. Would you be content with that?

Mr Francois: But it is not their Bill, Chair. That is the point, isn't it?

Q21 **Chair:** Mark, forgive me, but I am asking my question and, if you don't mind, I will do that uninterrupted. If that roll-out is the case, would you accept that or not?

Johnny Mercer: We have to understand and accept that there is absolutely no equivalence between those who don a uniform, sign up to the services and try to prevent civil war in Northern Ireland, and those who deliberately get up in the morning to go and murder women and children. There will never be any moral equivalence in that space, but we do have to accept that we are all equal under the law, and that within that space we have to find a policy that provides truth and reconciliation where it can, but also certainty for veterans. That is not undeliverable. That is not undeliverable, but it requires a political commitment that we have not seen today.

Chair: Okay, let's see what the Government do produce. That will be very interesting indeed. Let's move forward, with Sarah Atherton.

Q22 **Sarah Atherton:** Despite a short tenure as Veterans Minister, you have actually achieved quite a lot: the Armed Forces Covenant, the rail card, identification of veterans in the census, charity funding during covid, the guaranteed interview scheme, and the Overseas Operations Bill. That is quite a lot. Well done. What is your proudest moment?

Johnny Mercer: I hope that the Office for Veterans' Affairs, if it is correctly empowered and correctly prioritised politically by the Prime Minister, will be a strategic step change in how the country delivers for veterans. Through that vehicle, all the different strands can be pulled together. There is a third sector where demand is going through the roof but their money—and everything else—is going through the floor. There is a strategy provision that is only going to increase because we have a duty in this country to our veterans, and people like Simon Stevens in the NHS have ensured they have been looked after. We are on this journey. If the Office for Veterans' Affairs can get in that space and really organise and provide leadership in that space for what veterans need, then it is a game-changer and we will be the best country in the world in which to be a veteran. The trouble is that there needs to be political horsepower to do that: to talk to the NHS about contracts with Combat Stress, and to actually deliver things such as the Overseas Operations Bill, which predominantly affects veterans. If they are empowered to deliver that, progress is much easier.

The narratives developed around the Overseas Operations Bill were obscene. I felt it very personally. The individual who sent a soiled nappy to my wife was objecting to the Bill, because apparently I liked torturing people. I was never really allowed to go out and advocate in that space



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and talk about why that was absurd. It is all about political priorities. Every other Five Eyes country has a Cabinet Minister responsible for veterans; we are the only one that does not. We were the last to have the Office for Veterans' Affairs. That needs to change.

This is not my hobby horse; it is the nation's duty. The nation has a duty to those people. I have no doubt that at some point we will realise that. The great British public, I am afraid, give millions of pounds to this issue because they recognise that veterans in this country are not looked after properly. At some point, politicians will align with that. I just want us to get there sooner rather than later. There is a big political capital to it as well.

Q23 Sarah Atherton: You spoke about that veterans space and having an opportunity to do that. It is a complex situation, as you have just explained, but why didn't you do it? What regret have you got and what could change that?

Johnny Mercer: Because I was totally unsupported. While my civil service team, my private office and others, and the Prime Minister personally, were very supportive, Government is a huge system. In order to get things done, you need to be empowered to deliver things in your space. If you operate in a system where, essentially, you are a face on the policy but you have no real power over the policy levers pulled, it will get very difficult and messy.

I had some very difficult conversations with my Secretary of State, for example, on the Overseas Operations Bill. In the end, there are elements of it that will provide a degree of protection—don't get me wrong—but the whole narrative completely ran away with itself. That was the result of direct and deliberate decisions that, frankly, were made against the advice of myself, civil servants and legal teams in the Department.

Q24 Sarah Atherton: We will go on to the Northern Ireland legacy later, but you know we are undertaking a Sub-Committee on experiences—

Johnny Mercer: I'm sorry I didn't reply. I ejected just before your Committee, didn't I?

Q25 Sarah Atherton: Were you surprised by some of the evidence that we received?

Johnny Mercer: Yes, it is shocking. The female experience in the military is still nowhere near where it should be. There are females in the military who have a wonderful experience, without a shadow of doubt—maybe you were one of them. But the statistics and the narrative evidence around that would lend it to being a significant problem about how we treat women in the military.

My eldest daughter wants to join my regiment. Would I be comfortable with her joining? Yes, I would, because I could have some degree of control, but you read some of the experiences of females and they show that it is still not good enough. That is why I wanted to come and give evidence. I would listen to all the evidence sessions. I want everyone who



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goes into the military to have as great a time as I did, and to look back on it as the most promising time in their life. It absolutely breaks my heart when I meet women, members of the LGBT community or foreign and Commonwealth personnel who just want to get away from it as fast as they can. That is not what the military is about.

Q26 **Sarah Atherton:** Do you think rape trials should be heard in a civilian court?

Johnny Mercer: I had a different policy position from the Secretary of State on that. I am happy to declare that I had a different view, but I am not happy to go into the private conversations I had with the Secretary of State.

Q27 **Sarah Atherton:** I will try another one, Johnny, if you don't mind. The chain of command has not come out very well in the evidence. Do you think that there is scope to remove the chain of command from the military complaints system?

Johnny Mercer: I think the way that complaints go through the chain of command is clearly not working, and we need some sort of independent method of redress. But we must be very careful about that redress, because the military is a different organisation—it is not Tesco. People will be asked to do stuff they do not want to do, so inevitably they will have grievances. We must find a balance in the middle, where we are fair to people but the needs of the military come first, because of the nature of the organisation. It is not quite as black and white as laid out, but there is a strong argument to be heard around an independent complaints process,

It is not quite as black and white as laid out, but there is a strong argument to be heard around an independent complaints process, which there is with the Service Complaints Ombudsman, but obviously it takes far too long and does not provide good enough outcomes for our people.

Q28 **Chair:** May I commend what Sarah has done on the Sub-Committee? She has pioneered it; the rest of the Committee has supported, but she has done an incredible job. I think what we have uncovered is going to be quite illuminating. You said you didn't get an opportunity because you stepped back prior to attending. If you want to put something in writing, I am sure Sarah would be delighted to hear it.

Before we move on to the next question, you mentioned the job of veterans' affairs and the Five Eyes community. We often compare ourselves with the United States, where they have a completely separate set up, but that is also partly because of the NHS structures and support mechanisms that are there for veterans. I think we can be very proud—I hope you agree—with the construct that is there. Perhaps that is why the veterans' affairs machinery is of a lesser calibre than others. We need to bear that in mind. If you visit some of the veterans' hospitals in the United States—if you have ever had a chance to do that—you will know they are not as good as others. They have a different insurance policy system, which is very different from the NHS. I think that has to be kept in perspective.



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Johnny Mercer: Look, we do not want to replicate what the United States does to her veterans. At no stage do we want to replicate, essentially, any other country. We have the NHS, with good lines of care for our service personnel, but it needs a command and control structure. You cannot go to Plymouth and receive a wonderful experience because you are an armed forces veteran, then go someone else in the country and they'll be like, "Nah, haven't heard of that. You're just going to have to wait like everyone else for your treatment for PTSD," or whatever.

Q29 **Chair:** But you said there was no office. I think, looking around the room, some of us actually attended a drinks reception in the Office for Veterans' Affairs.

Johnny Mercer: That wasn't the Office for Veterans' Affairs.

Q30 **Chair:** What was it? Do you remember that?

Johnny Mercer: It was Michael Gove's office. Michael is responsible for a lot of things. He deserves a great big office.

Chair: Right, well, let's move on.

Q31 **Mr Francois:** To some degree, this debate is happening in a vacuum because, as is evident, we don't know what the precise proposals in this Bill will be. In today's Queen's Speech, the wording was as follows: "Measures will be brought forward to strengthen devolved Government in Northern Ireland and address the legacy of the past". That is the position as of today.

You have made the point that there was similar wording in previous Queen's Speeches, yet no legislation has emerged. It could be argued that, rather like the grand old Duke of York, we have been marched up to the top of the hill a number of times and marched down again. Do you think the same is true now or do you really think we are going to see a Bill in the next few weeks?

Johnny Mercer: Mark, if I had thought legislation was going to be forthcoming on this, I would not have left Government. I did not want to leave Government. It was hard, but I did not want to leave Government. The truth is, on the very day I left, I asked my Secretary of State if he had seen a single word committed to paper on these proposals, and the answer was no. These things have been talked about for many, many years.

Meanwhile, last week in Belfast, in the trial of the Joe McCann case, it had to be seen to be believed. I thought it was bad before I went, but the judge was very clear. It wasn't on a knife edge; he was very clear. What we have done to those men over the last six years is absolutely appalling. I cannot be part of an Administration that is going to promise these people things and then not make almost any effort to deliver on them.

It may be my fault and my undoing, but I think these people deserve better than that. I hear their individual experiences—their spouses dying, getting ill, colleagues drinking themselves to death—and they deserve a



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voice as much as anybody else. I respect everybody's campaigns in this space, and I vote for some of them, but these guys deserve a voice as much as anybody else. I am afraid what I saw last week broke my heart. I saw two men in that courtroom who were totally abandoned by their nation, which they had fought for.

- Q32 **Mr Francois:** Let's assume for a moment that you are wrong—just for the purposes of debate—and the Government is going to bring in legislation in the next few weeks. We do not know what is in it, but one thing we do know is that when the overseas operations Bill was published in March last year, because it did not cover Northern Ireland veterans, the then Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis issued—I think on the same day—a written ministerial statement that promised “equal treatment” to that accorded to Iraq and Afghan veterans. That was the spirit of what he said, and the phrase was “equal treatment”—I checked it at the weekend. So, if there is a Bill and it offers equal treatment, as the Northern Ireland Secretary has told Parliament it will, presumably all those protections—for instance, no decision to prosecute without the consent of the UK Attorney General—would have to be in that Northern Ireland Bill as well for the Government to have kept its word. Do you agree?

Johnny Mercer: In order for the Government to have kept its word in line with that statement from March 2020, it will have to deliver the same outcome—not through the same method—for service personnel who served in Northern Ireland as for those who are protected by the overseas Bill, which extends to the particular mechanism you are speaking of, yes.

- Q33 **Mr Francois:** Thank you. In terms of what the solution may be, there have been suggestions in the media of some form of statute of limitations. To be clear, that is not an amnesty, is it? My understanding—I would like your confirmation of this—is that veterans do not want an amnesty because, in simple terms, that would imply they were being forgiven for having done something wrong. Their view is that they did not do anything wrong; they were upholding the law in incredibly difficult circumstances. So, a statute of limitations is not an amnesty, is it?

Johnny Mercer: The proposals that I saw last week, which were referred to, are a kind of luddite's, politician's approach of just throwing a word at it and hoping we can capture all things and draw a clean line in this place. That is not possible in Northern Ireland. A statute of limitations is different—a qualified statute of limitations; that is important. I do not believe in a statute of limitations with a five-year ban, or whatever it may be. I do not believe it is fair—and neither does the veterans' community or anybody else I met in all my meetings in Northern Ireland—that there is a time limit on justice. You cannot have new evidence come to light and an individual not to be held to account. A qualified statute of limitations, where evidential thresholds have to be met, is deliverable and, in my experience this last week, generally palatable to all sides if we can agree on what those mechanisms may be.

Nobody really wants to see last week. The only people who want to see it are the lawyers who are sucking at a fire hose of public money. Even the



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McCann family was let down last week. That is unpalatable to some people, but even they were let down.

Q34 **Mr Francois:** Can I press you specifically on a qualified statute of limitations? There is a legal way of solving this problem, but the question is, will the Government adopt it? This is a complex issue, not least because of all the history. No one denies that. Previous iterations of this Committee looked into this issue twice and produced two very detailed reports. The first, from memory, was in either 2015 or 2016, and the second, in 2019, was "Drawing a Line: Protecting Veterans by a Statute of Limitations". I think you served on that Committee, but you left before the report was published because, by then, you were in government. Is that right?

Johnny Mercer: I was.

Q35 **Mr Francois:** But you were there for part of the genesis of it?

Johnny Mercer: I was there for all the hearings. I just was not allowed to change the report—which I would not have done.

Q36 **Mr Francois:** Okay; that is very clear. So, if you like, the policy of the Committee consistently across those two reports has been to call for a qualified statute of limitations. In other words, you do draw a line. You can reinvestigate something that has already been investigated, but only if there is compelling new evidence. That is the essence of why you say it is qualified. Have I got that right?

Johnny Mercer: You have got that right. There is more to it than that, but in simplistic terms you are right.

Q37 **Mr Francois:** But in essence that's it?

Johnny Mercer: Yes.

Q38 **Mr Francois:** With Northern Ireland there is always more to it, but, in essence, that's it.

The second key element, again recommended in both reports by this Committee, is some form of truth recovery method, à la the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whereby people could come forward and talk about what happened, including what happened to the disappeared and people's loved ones 40 or 50 years ago, without fear of prosecution. That was the other key element in the Committee's report. Do you support those proposals?

Johnny Mercer: I do, yes. I think broad swathes of the community in Northern Ireland would support those principles. Stand fast Sinn Féin, I engaged across the rest of the political spectrum in Northern Ireland. There was widespread acknowledgment that truth and reconciliation is as important a part of this as anything else.

Each individual family and each victim are different, but in broad brush strokes, in the round, most families want to know what happened. They do



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not want to see 90-year-olds in prison for stuff they don't remember. As politicians, we have a duty to deliver that.

Q39 Mr Francois: I agree. I have a couple more quick questions, then I will hand back to the Chair. Is it true, therefore, that there are potentially legally viable methods for solving this problem?

Johnny Mercer: Oh yes, of course.

Q40 Mr Francois: Is part of the difficulty here the decision that was taken, two or three years ago, to split the two Bills, so that the MoD would lead on the overseas operations Bill and the NIO would lead on the Northern Ireland Bill, because of all the sensitivities in Northern Ireland? One can see, to some extent, why that decision was taken, but isn't it true that officials in the NIO have never really wanted to do this, and that they have been foot dragging for years?

Johnny Mercer: Mark, I am not going to go for people in—

Mr Francois: I did not mention any individuals.

Johnny Mercer: You didn't mention any individuals. I don't want to criticise specific areas more than I need to. You have made some very fair points. The biggest challenge in this space is ill-informed debate, because people say very insensitive things, which, of course, if it was my child who was killed, would wind me up. It needs skilled people to provide real leadership and statesmanship in this space. It is possible—absolutely, it is possible—but we have to change course and do things differently, and we have to bring the community in Northern Ireland with us.

Q41 Mr Francois: I agree. Finally, what if the Government produce a Bill within the next few weeks and it includes some form of qualified statute of limitation? As with any parliamentary legislation, Johnny, the devil is in the detail. That is why we have a House of Commons and a House of Lords to scrutinise legislation line by line; that is part of our job. In principle, if they bring in a Bill in the next few weeks and it includes some form of qualified statute of limitation, allied with a truth recovery mechanism, will you support that?

Johnny Mercer: The broad principles? Of course I would support that. I have seen some ridiculous things written and said about what I am after in this space. All I want is fairness for veterans. A fair process like that would be supported by veterans.

What people forget is that nobody in the military wants individuals who cannot hold themselves to the standards that we tried so hard to maintain to be unaccountable. It damages everybody. I am bored of correcting people because it is just following a political narrative. Ultimately, we want people who break the law to be held to account, but at the same time we do not want the complete unfairness that we see in the process at the moment. I am sure it is not beyond the wit of man to find a way down the middle where we can prosecute those who break the law and leave those who have served in the military alone to live their old age.



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Q42 **Mr Francois:** This is not a competition. We all want to defend those who defended us. We are all approaching it from our different angles, capacities and the posts that we hold, or used to hold. On one level, hopefully we are all of good intent. If they came up with a Bill like that in the next few weeks, with a QSOL and a truth recovery mechanism, would you go through the Aye Lobby?

Johnny Mercer: I would be delighted. I would be absolutely delighted if we could get something over the policy line. I am aware that I resigned, and I have done all these things to try and shift the dial, and the Bill that was promised in the Queen's Speech today did not materialise, so I have been unsuccessful. I will do anything to be successful in this space and I would love to see any legislation for these people, who deserve someone to stand up for them.

Mr Francois: No one doubts your passion on this. Thank you, Chair.

Q43 **Chair:** Thank you, Mark. Just to pursue that a second...

Q44 **Chair:** Thank you, Mark. Just to pursue that a second, your proposal for a statute of limitations would only apply to those in uniform.

Johnny Mercer: A qualified statute of limitations.

Q45 **Chair:** So who would that apply to?

Johnny Mercer: With any law you brought in, we are all equal under the law and you would need to have very difficult conversations around applying it clearly on all sides. You cannot, in law, legislate to protect one group of people over another. Okay?

There is no equality here; there is no sort of equivocation between terrorists and those who served in the military. But whether we like it or not, we are all equal under the law. So, is this an amnesty for terrorists? Of course it's not, because if the evidence is there—right?—these people will be prosecuted. But it has to be equal and it has to be fair.

Q46 **Chair:** That is very different language to what was being pursued in my time. There was never, ever a consideration to expand that out to those civilians on the other side of this equation; it was always focusing on veterans and supporting them. And on the statute of limitations, when we spoke to other MPs, colleagues and so on, we said, "Let's protect our veterans". It wasn't anything to do with those who got caught up on the other side. And it is interesting that you are expanding that out now, which I suspect is where the Government are now about to go.

Johnny Mercer: It has always been my view, Chair; it has always been my view about Iraq and Afghanistan. You cannot legislate to protect one side in this. You have never been able to and neither would I seek to. It's about fairness for everybody.

Q47 **Chair:** I don't doubt what you are saying here today, but can you confirm that that wasn't the Government's intent up to today, because I am not aware of it at all? In all the discussions I have had—Committee members can chip in if they want—I am not aware of an intention to equal this out.



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Johnny Mercer: If I'm completely honest, Chair, there haven't been any real, deliberate, constructive, informed and really professional conversations about legacy that I have seen within Government, because if you try to get a policy like that off the starting blocks—"Can we protect people just because they served in the military?"—it is unlawful. So, anybody who operates in this space understands that is never going to get off the starting block.

Legacy is not an issue that you can just chuck politicians at and hope it will work. We have to understand the real detail—

Q48 **Chair:** I don't doubt that. This is a reality check that we have had to go through. I will just finish and then, Mark, you can come back in.

Do you agree that the other issue is that this will be subject to Northern Ireland Assembly approval?

Johnny Mercer: Everything needs to be a Northern Ireland-led solution. But on equivocation, Tobias, we have to be very, very clear—never any moral equivocation between these two groups. But we all are equal under the law.

Chair: This is very, very fresh. It's good to hear because, as I say, in my time as a Minister no one ever considered expanding this out to include the other side. And clearly you are going to bump into human rights law, because it is illegal to separate and give exception to one part of society.

Mark wants to come in and I see that Gavin also wants to grab my eye.

Q49 **Mr Francois:** My understanding is that because this Bill is a UK Bill from the UK Parliament, it does not require a legislative consent motion from the Northern Ireland Assembly—by law.

Johnny Mercer: That's correct.

Q50 **Mr Francois:** That motion might be desirable, but it is not legally a requirement. So it doesn't have to have the assent of the Northern Ireland Assembly, but it might be politically desirable. So, we clear that up.

You talked about equal treatment, but isn't part of the truth in this—all the way through—that several hundred alleged IRA terrorists were given so-called letters of comfort under the Blair Government following the Good Friday agreement? I don't think any of those have ever been successfully prosecuted for terrorist offences in a UK court; I think some may have been in a Republic of Ireland court. Or even if some of them have, there have been very, very few.

So, for years alleged IRA terrorists metaphorically had a letter of comfort in their pocket and they were off the hook from even being reinvestigated, whereas Northern Ireland veterans were not. That is patently unfair, isn't it?

Johnny Mercer: Yes. Just give me sixty seconds—okay? They are not alleged terrorists; these are convicted killers who were convicted in



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Northern Ireland and released under the Good Friday agreement. It has been a long campaign to then move on from that to the next stage for people like the IRA.

You now have, for example, people like Gerry Kelly, and his convictions, who is now on the police board in Northern Ireland. Two individuals who were recommended by prosecution were recommended by Barra McGrory. Barra McGrory used to represent individuals involved with the republican cause. I am not making allegations; these are facts. The reality is, if you let the judicial system be used like that, where individuals have to make individual decisions on what is in front of them—of course, no one would question their professional judgment, okay—you cannot honestly tell me, just because there is a new prosecutor and we get a new decision, that that is a fair way to treat veterans 50 years after the event.

Chair: May we bring in Gavin Robinson? You have the floor anyway, Gavin, so ask your supplementary and then move forward.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you, Chair. To be fair, you were suggesting that this was a new reflection that did not form part of the discussion when you were in ministerial office, but it did form part of the original Defence Committee report. The report, given that we are the House of Commons' Defence Committee, focused primarily but not exclusively on the service of the Armed Forces. A supplementary recommendation to the last Government was to extend that to the RUC and others who served in the security sphere, and another supplementary recommendation was for the Government to consider how far that should expand beyond that. There was no exclusion of other participants in the course of the troubles, but the clear distinction was that the state has an obligation under article 2 to investigate, and that where that obligation has been discharged, it should move on. Many terrorists who have evaded justice over the past 40 years have not been questioned, never mind made amenable before the criminal justice system, and that is the distinction—not that this should be an amnesty, but for those who have been satisfactorily investigated to move on. Those who have not been investigated should still face justice.

Chair: May I come back on that? It was being led by the Northern Ireland Office during my time, although that might have changed during Johnny Mercer's time. Certainly it was Northern Ireland but, because the Veterans Minister gets the questions, what is going on comes into that portfolio. In my time, certainly, there was no suggestion that this would be broadened out to the other side of the equation, even though the Committee clearly did some interesting work, which sadly was not picked up, although it looks like we might be going there now. Shall we move on to the wider issues?

Q51 **Gavin Robinson:** That is right, that is the distinction. The work was done by our Committee, and I served on it for both inquiries.

Mr Mercer, it was good to see you in Belfast last week. Thank you for your continued interest in this. Do you agree that, far from there being no legal avenue that could work in this situation, fundamentally it has



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failed because there has been a lack of political will, be that in Whitehall or in Belfast?

Johnny Mercer: That is precisely what it is. That is why I left Government. These things are all down to political will and to what the political priorities of the day are. Options have been available—for a number of years—but, as I have said many times, they require a commitment and a degree of leadership, statesmanship and ability that have not been there to date. We owe that to those people—not only to them, but to communities across Northern Ireland who do not want to read in their newspapers every single day about score settling and things like that through the courts; they want to get on with the amazing future that Northern Ireland could have, while putting in provisions for those who break the law to be held to account, historically as well. Those are not big asks.

In my experience, why has that not happened? It is political priority. I am afraid that people like you have not had the platforms that I would have liked you to have had over the years. You have always had a very qualified view on legacy. We have all worked together on a cross-party basis on those Committees and have come up with very sensible proposals, but the Government have not taken them up.

Q52 **Gavin Robinson:** You shared with us fairly and frankly the fact that on the day of, or in the hours leading up to, your resignation you asked the Secretary of State whether he had seen a paper—whether proposals had been brought to him—and he answered in the negative. Throughout the course of the year, when the overseas operations Bill was introduced, towards the conclusion of proceedings on it and on Third Reading, did you take it on yourself to inquire about the progress of the Northern Ireland-equivalent measures that were going to be brought forward? If so, can you give us a sense of those discussions and how, I imagine, frustration grew?

Johnny Mercer: When the Bill was first presented, I made it clear that I was not prepared to take it forward without a commitment on Northern Ireland from the Northern Ireland Secretary. That was forthcoming in his letter of 18 March that was presented. From that moment on and, indeed, throughout my time in the Department, every Monday, I would have about 20 15-minute meetings, back to back, with all my Departmental leads on specific policy areas—the veterans' gateway, mental health, the Office for Veterans' Affairs, legacy, whatever it might be. The Northern Ireland Office team within the MOD briefed me every single week. I am not going to say what they said, but suffice to say that there was no progress at all.

Q53 **Gavin Robinson:** That is what I was going to ask you. Was there progress throughout those weekly meetings or did you get the same information delivered on a weekly basis?

Johnny Mercer: Gavin, I will be completely honest with you. I made a video once, when I was getting a lot of criticism from veterans, just repeating, word for word, what the Prime Minister had said at the Dispatch Box about Northern Ireland veterans and what was in our manifesto. Word



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for word. A formal complaint was put into No. 10 and I received calls from Secretaries of State chewing me out over it. It is about political priority, it is about sticking to your promises and by the end, if I am honest, I felt like I was the last man in the room who believed that we should follow through on that, so I left.

- Q54 **Gavin Robinson:** It was mentioned earlier in our session that the commitment given during the leadership election was delivered on Armistice Day, I think—or at least, perhaps, when the Prime Minister did it. As a former Veterans Minister, can you give us your reflections on how appropriate you thought it was that, without any detail and in briefing to the press on election day last Thursday, this policy proposal was announced?

Johnny Mercer: It was completely crass. I had 16 meetings over those two days and you know that because I nearly fell asleep in mine with you. One of the things that we actually agreed on and that I gave my word to the families we would never do is an amnesty. I flew home that night and I saw it in *The Times*. To be honest, if I lived in Northern Ireland and I was treated like that, I would be pretty annoyed as well.

Gavin Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Chairman, can we confirm that it was not my fault that Johnny nearly fell asleep?

Chair: You keep us on our toes, Gavin, there is no doubt about that.

- Q55 **Gavin Robinson:** I think it is very powerful that you are reflecting. Have you had contact from veterans since then about how they felt in the aftermath? You have said how you feel about it, but do you know how other veterans have replied to you?

Johnny Mercer: Veterans do not want an amnesty. To pretend otherwise is delusional.

- Q56 **Gavin Robinson:** And should the proposals emerge in the next number of weeks that amount to an amnesty rather than the qualified statute we have discussed, can I confirm that you will not support such proposals?

Johnny Mercer: I have never supported an amnesty, I have never argued for an amnesty, I have never argued for soldiers to be above the law. I just want fairness.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, Johnny.

- Q57 **John Spellar:** [*Inaudible*] those incidents, you would be against that, unless it was just for the armed forces?

Johnny Mercer: I would not support anything that was discriminatory and I would not support anything that puts a time limit on prosecutions, irrespective of new evidence emerging now.

Chair: Stuart, do you want to come back?

- Q58 **Stuart Anderson:** You have left your position as a Minister. As you said, it was very hard. Do you, hand on heart, believe we will see legislation



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come forward for Northern Ireland veterans in this Parliament?

Johnny Mercer: When you leave the Government, I think you have to make an honest decision with yourself as to whether you are going to achieve more if you leave Government than if you stay. That is ultimately what it boils down to. I have realised in my short time in this place that people will not do anything really difficult until they are made sufficiently uncomfortable to do it. Irrespective of party and previous loyalties, I am afraid I will make this Government feel as uncomfortable as I possibly can until we deliver for these people, because they deserve someone to go to the wall for them, as much as anybody goes to the wall for any of their causes.

Q59 **Stuart Anderson:** I asked you at the beginning how effective you thought this Government had been in protecting veterans—on the manifesto pledge. How effective do the veteran community think the Government have been in supporting veterans?

Johnny Mercer: It is not great at the moment, but I hope that we can turn that round. The mechanisms are there: the Office for Veterans' Affairs; the board that has been set up on the OVA; the links and the work that we do; there are some brilliant people in the MoD, such as Helen Helliwell and others. The structure is all there, but ultimately everything is political and it needs as much political weight as Brexit or the coronavirus. This is not my hobby horse, this is the nation's duty, and we are almost the last country in the world to understand that, so we have a lot of work to do.

Q60 **Mr Francois:** [*Inaudible.*] I think we would all agree that this is a complex issue, for all the reasons we have been talking about, but despite all the complexities, it ultimately comes down to political will. It requires a Government who have the political will to do it, even if it is difficult, doesn't it?

Johnny Mercer: That is absolutely correct. You look at Brexit or any of these things that we are all divided on. There is no legacy policy now that everybody is going to set off fireworks for and think is great. This is a difficult area. There are no good press releases to come from this. It is a difficult area that requires leadership. That does not mean that we don't do it and we cut these men adrift. Of course it is deliverable, but it requires, as I have said a number of times, an ability and statesmanship and leadership that I have not seen to date.

Q61 **Chair:** Unless there are any further questions from my colleagues, I think that brings us to a conclusion. I think we can all agree that what unites us is the fact that we should provide support for our veterans. It is so important, if we want to recruit the next generation of Armed Forces personnel, that we are seen to look after the last generation. What is currently going on in Northern Ireland is sub-optimal, and that has led to your resignation.

We do have a Bill in the Queen's Speech. The Committee will be scrutinising that very carefully indeed. It is a complex issue, as we have



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discovered here today.

Johnny Mercer: There is no Bill in the Queen's Speech. One was promised from the Dispatch Box. There is no Bill in the Queen's Speech, so we need to be very careful in this space. There was an ambition around legacy legislation. The Queen did not mention a Bill on this space. These people deserve us to be careful and calibrated and calculated in this way, as much as we are about any other policy.

Chair: It is certainly in the detail of the information that the Government have produced today on gov.uk, spelling out that there is some form of legislation coming round the corner, but whatever it is, and in whatever guise it comes, we will certainly be looking at it.

Thank you for joining us here today. Thank you to the Committee members. Thank you to the staff. That brings the session to an end.