

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

Oral evidence: Work of the National Security Adviser

Wednesday 20 October 2021

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Members present: Margaret Beckett (The Chair); Richard Graham; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Darren Jones; Alicia Kearns; Lord King of Bridgwater; Lord Laming; Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho; Sir Edward Leigh; Angus Brendan MacNeil; Baroness Neville-Jones; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Lord Strasburger; Tom Tugendhat.

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 - 18

Witnesses

I: Sir Stephen Lovegrove, National Security Adviser, Cabinet Office; David Quarrey, Prime Minister's International Affairs Adviser and Deputy National Security Adviser, Cabinet Office.

Examination of Witnesses

Sir Stephen Lovegrove and David Quarrey.

Q1 **The Chair:** Welcome, Sir Stephen and Mr Quarrey, and thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us today. This is, as you will know, a follow-up session to our inquiry into the national security machinery that we have in the United Kingdom, following the publication of our report on that issue on 19 September. Since you appeared before us in that context, the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan has precipitated a rapid evacuation from Kabul, and it is that topic that we would like to focus on today.

I do not know whether you can observe, but this is a hybrid meeting and there are some members who will be joining us virtually, as well as those who are in the room.

If I could begin, it is estimated that there are literally thousands of Afghans who are, in principle, eligible for evacuation to the United Kingdom but who nevertheless remain in Afghanistan, at great risk to themselves and to their families in many cases. Why were the Government not more successful in achieving their objectives? You

indicated to us that there was an awareness of the situation and that there were preparations. Why were we not more successful in practice in carrying out that evacuation in August?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It is obviously a matter of great regret that there are Afghans to whom we owe a debt still in-country. The ARAP scheme, as you know, remains open indefinitely and we will do absolutely everything we can to get them out, if that is what they would like to do.

It would not be right, though, to characterise the evacuation as in any way undershooting our original ambitions for it. We originally estimated that we would be able to get out about 3,000 people under the ARAP scheme. We managed to get 2,000 out before the evacuation even started, and another 5,000 during the evacuation, which was known as Operation Pitting. We have got out some hundreds subsequent to that as well.

Against the original estimate of 3,000, we got out 7,000 to 8,000, and so, on any calculus, that must be looked upon as a qualified success against the background of some very difficult and challenging circumstances on the ground.

The Chair: I take your point entirely but that drives me to ask why we thought there were only 3,000 people who we needed to bring out when we now acknowledge that there were 7,000 to 8,000 and a lot more still left behind. There seems to have been some kind of hiccup there.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am not sure that we always thought that there were 3,000 who we needed to get out. That was the original estimate of the number of people we were likely to be able to get out by the end of September, which we have more than doubled and almost trebled.

The other thing I would say about this—and this was a factor that we were wrestling with throughout the whole of the evacuation and beforehand—is that the numbers moved around a lot. The fidelity of our assessments of people in both ARAP and the “leave outside the rules” cohort, as well as British nationals, was never as stable as we would like and, indeed, is not as stable as I would like even now.

Q2 Angus Brendan MacNeil: Last week, I was in Qatar and met some Afghan refugees who have come out. It was understandable, perhaps, that things might have been difficult in the chaos, but when I was in the refugee camp, which is in one of the World Cup lodgings, a number of refugees there were going to a number of countries, and I asked the question: which countries are the best at moving people on and transiting them through Qatar? Sweden and Italy came up first. I asked which were the worst. They knew we were from the UK Parliament and shamefacedly said that they unfortunately had to tell us that the UK was the worst at transiting them on further.

In the chaos, it might be understandable, but it might be indicative that we could be doing an awful lot better in moving people on. There were

some unaccompanied minors there. I can remember one young lad talking about Southall in London. He is alone in the camp now. Yes, he is out of immediate danger, but he has been left in limbo. Surely, things could be moving a bit faster in that area.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is a distressing story to hear. I am not at all pleased that you are passing on an assessment of our efficiency in moving people out of Doha like that. I am happy to take that away and see if there are improvements that we can make. I know that one difference that gives rise to disparities between processing times is the amount of security checking that different nations are doing. I know that Britain, under the Home Office, is doing more security checks than almost any other country. That may be part of the answer, but I am very happy to take away the point that we could be doing better there and to get back to you with some suggestions, if that is helpful.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Thank you. I am very grateful for that.

Q3 **Alicia Kearns:** I start by following up on Mr MacNeil's point, because I want it to be known that this is not unique. There are two female journalists and their immediate families, six people in total, who are at risk only because they ran a human rights radio programme for women across Afghanistan, created and funded by the UK Foreign Office. I have been supporting them since the start.

We managed to get them Baron gate clearance. They are now in Qatar, thanks to the Americans, who flew them to an American airbase there, but the Americans have made it clear that they will not take them to America. The Foreign Office has been aware of their case for three weeks now. They have been in Qatar for a long time. There seems to be no movement at all.

Yes, we have to do more checks, but given that these women were immediately given clearance to go through at the Baron hotel, and that we set up and funded them, we must have done due diligence at the time that we funded them to run a human rights radio station. I just want it to be known that this is not unique. It is heartbreaking for those of us who are still trying to get people back that they are messaging us every day saying, "The UK Government clearly do not care. You did not get us out. Now that we have got out, we are stuck."

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I do not know about that case. Again, I am really sorry to hear about it. It is, unfortunately, far from unique. I am sure there are many hundreds of similar cases right across all nations' refugee flows. It is an unfortunate fact of life that there are a lot of cases like that. The fact that those two individuals came out on an American plane is noteworthy, but it is also noteworthy that we took out 800 or so other foreign nationals on British planes, so it was very much a combined effort at the time. Again, I am happy to pick up with Foreign Office and Home Office colleagues on the particular points of the case. I do not know any further details.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you. I will write to you on those. You kindly wrote

to us in detail about NSC meetings and mentioned that the NSC had met four times to discuss Afghanistan this year. Were those meetings exclusively on Afghanistan? Have you met during August at all? Can we ask what the focus of those meetings was, particularly post evacuation in Afghanistan?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: To the best of my knowledge, those were exclusively on Afghanistan. The focus of the meetings would have changed, depending on what the presenting question was. NSCs are strategy and policy-setting meetings; COBR meetings are more operational. I would have to look at the records to find out whether there were any NSCs during August. There were certainly a lot of COBRs.

Throughout 2021, there were 11 NSCs or ministerial COBRAs, usually chaired by the Prime Minister, on Afghanistan. There were three NSCOs, which are the very senior officials. There were 14 official-level COBRs chaired by me and 28 chaired by Mr Quarrey on my right. Throughout the year, there have already been well over 50 meetings of very senior officials or Ministers to look at Afghanistan. The nature, rhythm and tempo of what they discussed would have been dependent on what the question was at the time.

Alicia Kearns: I have one final follow-up. I have been very fortunate to sit in COBRs under Mr Quarrey's chairmanship in my previous career. In terms of the NSC meetings and the strategic direction, have we now determined as a Government what our new strategic intent is for Afghanistan and what we hope to achieve? Where are we in terms of the next stage, long term, in what we are trying to achieve, or are we still very much in the operational mode of focusing on the next few weeks ahead of us?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We have a strategic direction that has been provided by the Prime Minister. That was done at the first post-crisis NSC, which was on 3 or 4 September. I am clearly not in a position to divulge what was discussed at the NSC, but there was a very clear discussion of the priorities that we need to have as we go forward.

I would not say that we are past the operational stage at all. You have spoken eloquently about some of the problems that we still have in Afghanistan, but also in Qatar. We have a really heavy job of work to do in housing and settling Afghans who have landed and will continue to land in the UK, so there is a very regular drumbeat of meetings on that more operational stuff that goes alongside the strategic stuff.

David Quarrey: What we can do at this stage is establish our priorities and objectives for this. It is way too early to be able to identify the likely end state in any foreseeable timeframe. As Sir Stephen said, there is a huge amount of operational work still under way. We have a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. We have regional implications. We have quite a complicated discussion with our international partners about how we align our efforts and engage with the Taliban and others at the moment. All of those are in play right now.

Q4 Lord King of Bridgwater: The point was made that Sweden was the best and we were the worst. Presumably, there is a considerable difference in the numbers that might have been involved. I do not know how many had connections with Sweden and were hoping to get out.

What I am not quite clear about is this. In your paper, you said that faster collapse was recognised to be a possibility but was not considered likely. That does not appear to be the view held by the ambassador, who, presumably, was fairly well informed on this. He thought it was more probable. Presumably, as it was reckoned to be a possibility, considerable work was done to prepare for it, or was it not?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It was. The point you make about Sweden having far fewer people to process may well be true. It is likely to be true. That does not necessarily exempt us from wanting to do the job as quickly as possible, but I take the point.

Pretty much from the moment at which the Doha agreements were signed, there was an intensive set of activities drawing on many different types of information and intelligence to assess what the likely outcome was going to be. We assessed that the central scenario was always going to be a Taliban-dominated Government. We thought that there was a considerably lower but not negligible likelihood of civil war. When we were thinking about the Taliban-dominated Government and how quickly that would come to pass, we certainly did not have that speed of collapse as the central scenario. In fact, nobody did—not the Taliban, the Afghan Government or the Americans.

It is certainly true that the ambassador, as was his predecessor, was feeding in information right the way through and participating in all the discussions around the joint intelligence table, and at COBRs and NSCs. As the pace of events accelerated, Sir Laurie was very alive to that, but his being alive to that fed into our assessments of planning, which was why, as those assessments from him came in, we accelerated our planning as well.

It is wrong, in a sense, to say that he had a completely fixed view which was an outlier all the way through and did not get fed into the machine. It was not there all the way through and it certainly did get fed into the machine and have an effect on our planning, which had started pretty much in the middle of 2020.

Lord King of Bridgwater: The possibility of it was enough of a consideration for it to have required a complete and proper plan to be prepared, if this was the worst outcome. Was that done?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes. The reason why Operation Pitting was capable of being successfully triggered and overachieved against its ambitions, albeit in very harrowing scenes and with a great deal of human suffering, was that the plans were in place for a whole range of scenarios, including faster collapse.

David Quarrey: At every single one of the meetings that we held across the summer focusing on Afghanistan, which started after the American announcement on 14 April, Sir Laurie, his predecessor or their deputies fed in the view from the ground, so it was integral to all the analysis that we had, alongside the work that the JIO was doing.

Through those meetings, we were trying to do various things. One was to plan to stay, working very hard with the Americans to try to create the conditions under which we could stay, arguing for a strong, continuing UK role and for the security assurance that we would need to maintain an embassy in Kabul. We were also planning for contingencies and much worse, including the possibility that the thing would collapse.

As Sir Stephen said, that is one of the reasons why the evacuation happened as well as it did. There had been an awful lot of work to accelerate the ARAP scheme and to get Op Pitting in the right order across the summer.

Sir Edward Leigh: Were the four meetings of the NSC to discuss Afghanistan chaired by the Prime Minister?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I believe they were, yes.

Sir Edward Leigh: So he was present at all of them?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes.

Q5 **Tom Tugendhat:** Given that the announcement of the US withdrawal was first mooted in 2008 at the time of the surge and that the Trump peace talks of December the year before had, effectively, put in a hard deadline, why were we not planning on getting people out from then?

David Quarrey: I am not saying that planning started in April this year. There had been a whole process before then; ARAP had been approved in principle in December and Op Pitting had been worked on for years before. I am not suggesting at all that work to plan started only then, but it went through an intensification once it was clear what this Administration's plans were. We were in detailed discussion from the very first with this Administration. I had my first call with my US counterpart on 28 January this year, talking about Afghanistan, how we were planning and how we would want to stay. All that work had been continuing for a long time but it did go into a different phase after 14 April, because of the decision that the President had taken. That is my point.

Q6 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** Sir Stephen, you said that, after the Doha agreement, your working assumption was that there would be a Taliban-dominated Government, however it came about. Am I right in my understanding that that was your assessment?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is correct. Our central assessment was that, ultimately, there would be a Government that was either entirely Taliban or dominated by the Taliban.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Presumably, it would flow that one would not consider this an outcome that was necessarily particularly favourable to western interests or to people who had worked for western Governments.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Absolutely, that is the case. It is certainly not an outcome that anybody was comfortable with, but we need to deal with the world as we see it rather than as we would wish it to be.

Baroness Neville-Jones: One of the things you said in the letter that you kindly wrote to the committee was that the south Asia national security implementation group—NSIG—had a work strand on contingency planning and that it met during July and August. Could you say what its focus was, who chaired those meetings and what they were focusing on at that stage?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I will pass to Mr Quarrey for that.

David Quarrey: Again, there are two different phases here. The south Asia NSIG was leading the policy work and the contingency planning on Afghanistan until April this year, but we then moved into a different gear after the President's announcement. From memory, the south Asia NSIG was looking at what we could do to support the political process and what we could do in terms of contingency planning.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Could you be precise on that? What do you mean by "what we could do in terms of contingency planning"? It seems to me that it would be absolutely crucial at that stage.

David Quarrey: Yes, it was. Work was under way looking at, for example, Op Pitting and the preparatory work for that, but also at the conditions under which the embassy might be able to stay in Afghanistan.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Can you give dates?

David Quarrey: I do not have all the south Asia NSIG dates. I have the dates for the meetings that I chaired from April onwards—I think there were 28 between April and August—but I would have to come back to you on the dates for the NSIG before April.

Baroness Neville-Jones: It would be very helpful if we could know.

David Quarrey: There were four main areas of work, which I have somewhere in my briefing pack and can find in a moment.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Was contingency planning taking place anywhere else?

David Quarrey: Particularly in the MoD; PJHQ was planning for Op Pitting for a long time.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Could you say more about that, please?

David Quarrey: I do not have the detail of all the contingency work and what was done precisely when over time, I am afraid.

Baroness Neville-Jones: It would be helpful if we could have that.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I cannot remember exactly when Op Pitting was reassessed, but I know that an MoD team went out to Kabul to rescrub the Pitting plans many months before the evacuation plan was triggered. It is in my papers and I can find it for you at some point in the next hour.

Baroness Neville-Jones: That would be helpful. As the situation became more perilous and more urgent, what rhythm of planning took place?

David Quarrey: We launched the cross-Whitehall process after the President had announced his decision in April. We had 28 sessions between then and the launch of Op Pitting in August. We used to talk to an agenda of roughly five points, one of which was about how we would work to secure the continuing presence of the embassy.

It was a huge piece of work that we were doing with the Americans, because the intent throughout was to try to find a way to stay, persuading the Americans to keep more people and to work on what became known as the diplomatic assurance plan, so that we would have a credible security plan within which our embassy could nestle in Kabul. There was a big strand of work about the conditions under which the embassy could stay.

There was a second on accelerating resettlement work, particularly ARAP, and seeing what we could do to get more people out in advance of any crisis there and then to create the conditions for getting more out when the crisis came. There was a third around preparing for our counterterrorism, counternarcotics and other homeland security work, particularly in the contingency of a situation that had got much worse.

There was another strand on supporting the Afghan state, because that was central to what we were trying to do to prevent the worst outcomes, in terms of our economic and political support to the Afghans as well as military advice. Finally, there was work on supporting the political process more generally, including the work that General Sir Nick Carter did with the Afghan and Pakistani leaderships to try to build trust there. There was a whole set of strands of work under way, which went into a different gear after April.

Baroness Neville-Jones: What months are we talking about?

David Quarrey: This was between April and August.

Baroness Neville-Jones: By August, a large number of senior people were on holiday.

David Quarrey: There were still a lot of people working on it, I can tell you.

Baroness Neville-Jones: It was a very perilous situation by then.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have found the reference I was looking for earlier. You will remember that it was on 14 April that President Biden made his first announcement that he wanted to get out by 9/11. NATO announced the following day that the end of the operation was going to happen. The MoD team went out to do an in-country reconnaissance mission to review Pitting contingency plans on 21 April, under a week after that. You will also remember that President Biden announced that he wanted to bring forward the final end—for whatever reason, it was not going to be 9/11—to the end of August.

Even on 10 June, the Americans assured us that we were all going to be working on some form of diplomatic assured presence there. It was only right in part of August, when things were really accelerating the wrong way, that it became clear that it was going to be difficult, if not impossible, to do that.

Baroness Neville-Jones: That is when people were on holiday.

Q7 **Tom Tugendhat:** I am very pleased at the list of engagements, plans, meetings, NSCs and NSCOs that you have just described. I am slightly surprised, therefore, that we got to August and, to pick up on Baroness Neville-Jones's point, the PUSs of the Foreign Office and the Home Office, and you too, Sir Stephen, I believe I am right in saying, were away.

I am particularly surprised that, despite the fact that a British embassy was pretty close to being under direct attack, British officials were unquestionably in fear of their lives and the military had to deploy in order to hold a bridgehead to evacuate them, various senior officials stayed on holiday. Would you expect a platoon commander to go on holiday just before the whistle went, or a general to stay on holiday at the time of a major operation?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We have structures right across Whitehall that allow for the continuity of senior leadership, such that we do not have to rely on single points of failure. I cannot remember a moment throughout the time we were doing this that I felt the lack of senior engagement in an entirely empowered way to be able to get the best result for the Afghan civilians to whom we owed a debt, and for British nationals and those of many other countries.

Tom Tugendhat: Quite a lot of the decisions being taken in those days after 15 August were extremely fine judgment calls.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: They were.

Tom Tugendhat: They were calls as to whether an entitled person could travel with their children and, if some were over the age of 18, whether those children would be denied asylum in the UK or included despite their age. There were other decisions on deploying people to the Gulf to support or to go forward. These were very fine decisions.

It strikes me as odd that, at a time when these decisions are, as you rightly already acknowledged, extremely fine judgment calls, those

people who are charged by the Crown and the state to make the finest and most difficult judgment calls were not quite literally walking the rooms to have the backs of those junior officials, who could then turn to them and ask the kind of questions that you ask only when you are face to face—the ones that you have to answer quickly and under enormous amounts of pressure.

It strikes me as a little odd that the formal chain through the emails or official phone call once a day or once a week would be seen as an alternative to that. I speak only from my own experience of a few years in the military and few years on operations. It strikes me as very odd that, at the time of a major operation, the general does not walk the floorplate and support their junior officers.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would not agree with that characterisation. I chaired the daily Whitehall meeting throughout the whole period of the evacuation and shortly afterwards. The kinds of decisions that you are talking about were discussed intensively at those meetings, and very senior officials, headed by me in the main, provided advice to Ministers, most notably the Home Secretary, who had to make the most difficult decisions and did so very quickly.

I do not believe that there would be many officials who were involved in the exercise and making some of those decisions, certainly in Whitehall and, I would hope, on the ground as well, because we devolved a great deal of responsibility to those brave men and women who were on the ground, both official and military, who felt that, in some way or other, they lacked senior air cover. I would be astonished if they thought that and I have not heard anybody say so.

Tom Tugendhat: If you look at the evidence that has just been submitted to the Foreign Affairs Committee, you will see evidence of that from a junior Foreign Office official, who has recently resigned on exactly the grounds that he and others in his cohort were making decisions throughout the night, throughout long days and throughout the weekends and, when looking for senior cover, found very often that it was not there. It is not that the policy was not there. You are absolutely right, Sir Stephen, that the policy was agreed, but as you know the policy did not cover the detail, and nor could it. I do not criticise you for not having a policy that covers literally every single evacuation decision. You cannot possibly have that, but that is literally the point of having the senior official around and available to assist with those decisions.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am not aware of the case that you talked about.

David Quarrey: For us in the National Security Secretariat, I was acting National Security Adviser for six months. Stephen trusted me while he was away. Whenever I needed a view from Stephen, I spoke to him. I consulted him on a number of decisions and ways forward, and I think our team felt throughout that they had senior leadership. I have direct access to the Prime Minister when I need it, so I am entirely confident

that, in terms of our senior cover within the National Security Secretariat, we were well covered.

Tom Tugendhat: Can I come back to the point that this is not just about the policy structures that you put in place? You have described, quite reasonably, a pattern of engagement and senior official and ministerial meetings that built up to 15 August. It just strikes me as odd that, at the moment when the crunch happens, people do not immediately feel, "Hang on a minute. The battle rhythm has taken us to this point. This is surely the moment when the generals must come back".

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have to say I did not feel the lack of my Permanent Secretary colleagues throughout the process.

Tom Tugendhat: Does that say more about them?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It is not to say that they would not have added value if they had been there. There were some very senior, empowered directors-general from the Foreign Office, the Home Office and the MoD, all of whom were adding value.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Just to finish that point, would you be willing to release to us the attendance at these meetings?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Can I get back to you on that?

Lord King of Bridgwater: If you are nervous about the names, perhaps you could give the grade and the level of the people who were attending.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I can give you an indication of that now. I chaired all the meetings through the evacuation and I am absolutely confident that every department involved was, in almost all cases, represented at director-general level—the level below Permanent Secretary.

Lord King of Bridgwater: It would be very helpful if we had that information.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I will seek that out.

David Quarrey: The same was true in the run-up to that period.

Tom Tugendhat: May I just complete that thought and ask the question that a young officer gave to Her Majesty when invited to dinner at Buckingham Palace? It was noticed that he was not wearing his most formal shirt. He said, "No, ma'am, I wear it only on special occasions". How much more special, dangerous or strategic an occasion would it have had to be for PUSs to cancel leave than the overrun of an embassy, the life endangerment of officials and the reversal of 20 years of Britain's foreign policy?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: All I can say is that the systems worked well in very difficult circumstances.

Tom Tugendhat: Would they have worked better if the senior officials—

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I genuinely do not believe so. I have been a Permanent Secretary and I know that, quite a lot of the time, the heavy lifting is done by the directors-general and the directors.

Sir Edward Leigh: What is the point of them, then?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I was going to say, it is a very depressing answer.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The point of them is to give overall guidance to the department, not to constantly seek to second-guess operational decisions. That would be impossible in organisations of that scale.

Lord King of Bridgwater: I agree with that point.

The Chair: Ms Kearns, do you still want to come in?

Alicia Kearns: It is very kind of you to call me, Madam Chair, but the points I was going to make were identical to Tom's. I see the Permanent Secretaries choosing not to come back only as an abdication of duty of care to their staff, because that is their fundamental job, not necessarily to get involved in operations.

This was not just another standing up of the crisis centre. We know that the crisis centre was stood up time and time again. There is crisis after crisis. This was a catastrophe of 20 years of foreign policy being brought down, and there is either redundancy of the Permanent Secretaries having any fundamental role to play in the shaping of policy and the care of their staff, or gross disinterest in the interests of their staff.

We have all worked on Christmas Day when places are liberated from Daesh. You get on those calls and you do the work. I would never have left my team, and I was not a Permanent Secretary. Tom has made the point, so I will move on, but it was an absolute abdication of care for those staff. This was not any other crisis. This was a catastrophe and I cannot understand how they can justify to themselves, their staff or you—you deserve better—not turning up. As your foot soldiers, they should have been in there to fight for their teams and their offices. I apologise that there is no question in that, but Tom made the point very well.

The Chair: The fact that sensitive data was not destroyed when the embassy had to be vacated is an indication of how serious the situation was. I absolutely share the view that Mr Tugendhat and Ms Kearns have expressed.

Q8 **Lord Laming:** I will carry on similarly with that theme: there were 20 years in Afghanistan helping build up a resourceful Government and national army. Sir Stephen and Mr Quarrey, what was your personal involvement in planning for the withdrawal?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I spent most of the time when the withdrawal was being planned for at the Ministry of Defence. I was involved in some of the organisation around Op Pitting, but ultimately that was a military exercise. When I came over to be the National Security Adviser in May, the first NSC that I did was on Afghanistan, and I then put into place the direction that the Prime Minister gave us at that point. Most of that work was then remitted to the subgroup, chaired by Mr Quarrey, which did the detailed planning for the withdrawal.

David Quarrey: As Sir Stephen said, he tasked me with leading the process across Whitehall after the President's announcement on 14 April. Our role was then to co-ordinate between the different departments, to ensure that we had the right alignment of action and that policy was reflecting the decisions taken by the National Security Council and the Prime Minister's wishes on all of this. The number of meetings is rarely a good indication of success or failure, but I chaired 28 of those meetings, bringing together all the key departments across Whitehall. That was our main vehicle for co-ordinating all that work across government.

In addition to that, alongside Stephen and all his international engagement, I spoke to my US counterpart I think 12 times about Afghanistan between January and August, and did direct work with other partner Governments as well, including those, for example Turkey, that would have an important role in action on the ground and whether we could stay. It was primarily a role of bringing together Whitehall and doing direct international diplomacy around this, as well as supporting the Prime Minister.

Lord Laming: So detailed planning took place throughout the whole of this process. Am I right to think that?

David Quarrey: Yes. As I said earlier, there was a great acceleration of that planning after the President's decision on 14 April, which is not at all to say that no planning had been done before. Extensive planning had been done across Whitehall that had been run through different administrative arrangements, but that planning was additionally accelerated after the announcement on 14 April.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would not want the committee to get the impression that all the work was remitted to Mr Quarrey's group, because it was not. The Prime Minister was extremely active, speaking to world leaders about this. I spoke to my counterparts in America many times, as well as other countries. The Foreign Secretary was extremely active on his channels. Other diplomatic colleagues were also extremely active. There was a great deal of activity going on right across government.

Lord Laming: In that context, you said earlier, Sir Stephen, that everybody was surprised by what happened with the withdrawal from Afghanistan. With all this planning having gone ahead, may I ask each of you whether you are surprised that you were surprised when these things happened so quickly?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is a very good question. As you will know, intelligence assessments always come along with degrees of confidence attached to them. They range from high to low. I cannot remember any intelligence assessments coming around this particular set of issues with something that was called high. The level of confidence was never going to be 100%, because nobody has a perfect crystal ball.

Why was I surprised? I have thought about that. There are a whole host of reasons that historians and, indeed, commentators now will want to get into, but some of the reasons why the speed of collapse happened so quickly, which people will want to think about, were the credibility of and, therefore, loyalty to the Government of Afghanistan. They will want to think about whether the type of indigenous armed forces that were built up in Afghanistan were capable of sustainment when many of the enablers were taken away. That was a point made by Secretary Lloyd in front of the congressional hearings that he did the other day.

The withdrawal of some of the contacts at the lower levels of the ANDSF probably meant that the visibility of levels of morale and loyalty in the ANDSF was not as great in 2021 as it possibly was 10 years before. There are a whole host of reasons why the speed of collapse was as it was and took everybody by surprise. Those are three. There will doubtless be others.

Lord Laming: And it was impossible to anticipate any of this.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It was not impossible to anticipate it. Indeed, it was anticipated in that it was contemplated that the speed of collapse could be very fast, but that was a very low-level confidence scenario. There were two things in the central scenario: that we would be capable of maintaining a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and that the Government of Afghanistan would be operative until probably, at a minimum, the end of this calendar year. Those two things did not come to pass and, at that level, the assessment was wrong, but nobody ever said that the assessment was definitely going to be right. It just happened to be a lower level of probability than we and everybody else thought at the time, including the Taliban.

David Quarrey: All of us who worked on it have asked and keep asking ourselves this question. I was in Moscow three or four weeks ago, and almost the first words that my Russian counterpart said to me were, "Nobody expected it to happen in this way and at this pace". As Sir Stephen said, every international counterpart we talked to and virtually every serious commentator did not predict that it would happen at the pace that it did. In all the JIC assessments, there was a possibility, but, as Sir Stephen said, things were rated in terms of likelihood and we did not judge it to be the most likely outcome.

Indeed, it was not inevitable. It was possible that other decisions that could have been taken, particularly by the Afghan Government, could have changed the direction of what happened, so there was not

necessarily an inevitability about it. Literally nobody I have spoken to foresaw it happening in the way that it did.

Lord Laming: Why did no one foresee this possibility? After 20 years of the build-up of intelligence, understanding, having feet on the ground and knowing what was happening, why was it not possible, with the intelligence and all the other things that we had at our disposal as allies, to get closer to what happened? It seems to me that the difference between the aspiration and the reality was rather huge.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It is a really good question and I cannot give you a completely authoritative answer. I suspect that one aspect of it is that, over the last few years—and remember that combat operations stopped in 2014—the ground truth, as our military colleagues would put it, and the fidelity with which we understood the ground truth might have slipped away from us. It is not a question I can answer with a great deal of conviction, I am afraid; it is something we need to look into.

David Quarrey: I should emphasise that the fact that the JIC did not judge it as the most likely scenario did not mean that we were blind to the deterioration in the situation on the ground, and the rate at which that deterioration was accelerating during, for example, June and July. As I said in my earlier reply, every meeting that we held started with a view from the ground. You can see the Taliban moving in 26 out of 34 provinces in June, with provincial capitals starting to fall from July, but I still do not believe it was inevitable then that the outcome would be the one that transpired. Decisions could have been taken, particularly by the Afghan Government, that might have led to a different outcome.

Q9 **Tom Tugendhat:** May I just go back to your point about your Russian colleague? I take the point you made. To be fair to him, we have an advantage over them, in that we had been training the Afghan army for the last 20 years and he had not. We knew that we had withdrawn the enablers out of Bagram air base, which neutered their air capability, and their aviation was grounded. We knew, because we still had embedded troops alongside some of the commando forces right up until the end, what the ground truth was of the morale of the mobile rapid reaction groups of about 40,000. We knew, from operations that we conducted alongside the Afghan armed forces, what the morale was like, who was getting paid and who was not, right up until August 2021.

I take the point that it was a surprise to the Russians. I am just slightly disappointed that it was a surprise to us, given that we were paying for it. I am also slightly concerned, because there can be very few countries in the world about which we knew as much as we knew about Afghanistan up until 15 August. We trained its National Directorate of Security. We armed its army. We had embedded advisers with almost every Minister. We had DfID staff or DfID contracted agents on the ground in almost every province. We had as good an understanding of Afghanistan up until August as it is possible to have of any country. We got that strategic assessment wrong. Can you please tell me what your strategic assessment is of the situation in North Korea?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would just like to question whether the UK had as much visibility of exactly what was going on in Afghanistan as you have portrayed, and whether we had a better view of it, as you seem to be implying, than our US colleagues.

Tom Tugendhat: No, I am not.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think you said that it was unparalleled or at least as good as everybody else's.

Tom Tugendhat: No, I said we had the best that we have of any foreign country. The Americans may definitely have had a better one, because they had incredibly close partnerships. But, as you know, our agencies have been operating hand in glove in Afghanistan for more than 20 years—in fact, in some ways, for about 50 years. The overlap should be, I would have hoped, pretty close, and I am sure that Jake Sullivan has been speaking to you about it as closely as anybody.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: American colleagues, who had far more people and assets on the ground, have certainly as good a view of Afghanistan as anybody, and they too avowedly did not see the speed of the collapse coming.

Tom Tugendhat: The Senate is making sure that it is asking these questions of them as well.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It is entirely right and proper that it is, and nobody is shying away from the fact that the central assessment turned out to be wrong. Nobody is pretending that that is not the case. What we are trying to do here is work out why that was the case. We are open to very honest self-assessment and assessment by others as to how we got that wrong.

Tom Tugendhat: I am very grateful to hear that because you will understand that there are quite a lot of things going on in other parts of the world, from China to Chile, and I would very much hope that you are looking at various national security assessments and the implications for UK interests around the world in a range of areas. How will you look at the JIC process? Do you think there was an intelligence failure, an analytical failure or simply a judgment failure?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would say that the assessment of what would happen in Afghanistan, with the single but crucial exception of the rapidity of the collapse, was correct. We need to look at why we got the rapidity of the collapse question wrong. We, NATO and the Foreign Office are doing that. I chaired a day-long lessons learned exercise in the MoD last week. We are all looking at what the lessons learned here are. I do not think, candidly, that we need to tear up the way we do assessment and intelligence. A great deal of what we thought came to pass. The speed at which it came to pass was the thing we got wrong.

Tom Tugendhat: The problem is that we have seen this with the collapse of the Iraqi forces and now with the collapse of the Afghan

forces. There are parallels here. You manage the JIO and UKIC processes. This raises quite a lot of questions that I know you will be wanting to look at. Have you set up a red team to challenge yourself?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We have red teams in a number of places, and all departments are doing it. I do not oversee the JIO. Doctrinally, that is separate, but you are absolutely right about the UKIC and we are looking at it hard. We take Chilcot and Butler responsibilities seriously. We know that this did not end in the way that we wanted it to and that we got the speed of that collapse wrong, and we need to ask ourselves some hard questions about it.

David Quarrey: It was always acknowledged in the JIC that the closer we got to the point of departure, the cloudier a picture we would have. Almost all British forces were out by 8 July, so it is not correct that it was right up until the very last point. It was explicit that, the more the focus was on the retrograde, the harder it would be to maintain the fidelity of picture that we would have before.

I agree with you on red teaming. There is also a question about whether having a large amount of military in a country and a large amount of intelligence focusing on CT and other things is a good way to understand a country. I am not convinced that it is.

Tom Tugendhat: Can we have a report back when you have red teamed and thought of different ways of doing it? It would be very good for this committee to hear what you are planning.

Q10 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** Mr Tugendhat has gone into the area that I was proposing to raise, but I would just say two things. I know, having done it, how difficult assessment is, but it is a great mistake in government, it seems to me, to rely too heavily on these assessments.

We keep on hearing about the central assessment, and you say that, with the exception of the speed of the collapse, we got other things right. The truth of the matter is that the speed of the collapse shows that we were taken in by appearances rather than reality. These structures were a great deal more fragile than we allowed for or understood, which has to tell you that there were levels of our understanding of what the situation was that simply were not right and gave us a false degree of confidence.

I have to say that it is a dilemma in assessment work, but it worries me if the Government place all their dice on a timetable that says that we may have declining security but it will be fairly slow, and that we have time. That places a degree of reliance and confidence on something that is inherently extremely chancy for the pursuit of policy. I have to say—and so would an outsider—that the contingency planning should have been more thorough, deeper and faster than was the case. That is the charge against the Government.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am afraid I have to disagree with that characterisation. First, we did not place all our dice on the central scenario.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Then how is it that you were not doing it more quickly?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: As it became clear that what we thought was the avowed but less likely scenario was taking place, we were capable of accelerating all our plans. As a result of that, we were capable of evacuating far more people than we originally anticipated. I understand the point of the criticism but do not believe that, in the circumstances, it is justified.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Sir Stephen, you speak as if you had had a success.

Q11 **Alicia Kearns:** This goes back slightly to the strategy point. There are three aspects of the strategy that I am trying to get my head around. The first is how much time and assessment went into the likely success of having a smaller confidence force footprint—not that we could replicate exactly what the Americans had, but a reduced force of some kind that did not pull the rug completely from under the Afghan national forces.

Secondly, what was the assessment of any opposition beyond the Afghan national forces? Did we realistically think that there were going to be other opposition forces or that countries in neighbouring areas might, in some way, step in to prevent the incoming of the Taliban? I would not put Pakistan in that box, for obvious reasons.

Thirdly, what was the worst-case scenario in that scenario planning that you saw? Is it what we have now or did you think there could be a worse scenario? What did the Afghan national security adviser you met with in July feel was the worst-case scenario?

David Quarrey: On the last of those, this might not necessarily be the worst outcome. A protracted civil war was a possibility acknowledged in the hierarchy of JIC possibilities.

Tom Tugendhat: It is still a possibility.

David Quarrey: I agree with you; I am not disagreeing with you. A full-blown civil war could have been an even worse outcome at this stage than the situation we have, however challenging it may be. It was acknowledged that there were other scenarios in all of this. It struck us, and I think it was the right judgment, that there was no realistic possibility of other regional states intervening in a way that would have had any kind of decisive impact on the trajectory.

We looked at different possibilities for staying, but it was very clear, including in the discussions in the North Atlantic Council in April and all the preparations that went into that, that, if the Americans were going, everybody else was going. The alliance went in together, it adjusted together, and it was leaving together. We looked at this several times, and there was no realistic possibility of staying without the Americans. It was clear that the President had made that decision, and he was going.

Alicia Kearns: Was that because of a lack of confidence from all the other parties that they could stand on their own without the Americans? I find it hard to buy. I recognise the civilian force that came alongside the Americans in terms of the air force, and so on. I understand that only the Turks were willing to stand with us; do correct me if that was wrong. They were willing to consider some sort of force remaining, but it seems, given the small footprint overall—I recognise this is from the other side—that no other partner was willing to stand up and say, “Yes, we can do some sort of confidence force so that it doesn’t just fall away and we don’t pull out everything under them”. We have to be able to operate without the Americans, or else we fundamentally have a real problem for the remainder of the Biden term.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Remember that, until early to mid-August, the aim was that we would leave behind a force. It would have an American core to it, and the rest of us would make some contribution. Indeed, the Prime Minister was very clear at various stages with American counterparts of different positions that the UK was prepared to do more than its fair share in such a force.

As things became more difficult, I certainly had a number of conversations with European colleagues. You had conversations with some of your contacts as well, and it was very clear that there was no appetite whatever on the part of any other country to stay without the Americans. The idea that the UK alone would be able to do that, as the Prime Minister has already said in the House, was just not for real contemplation. Indeed, the Secretary-General of NATO said a couple of days ago that it was absolutely unrealistic, politically or practically, for people to stay without the Americans. That was broadly the view that was taken repeatedly throughout the process.

Alicia Kearns: While I buy entirely that the UK could not have stood up and replaced it on its own, should we not be terrified when we look, strategically, at our national security going forward? Of all the NATO partners, the G7, and all the different constellations of alliances we have on which we should absolutely map out our security, no one else is willing to stand with us without the Americans. I know they bring the money and quantities, but, if they are not going to stay in Afghanistan, what hope is there for future interventions against mass human rights atrocities if the Americans are not interested and everyone else will not stand together without them?

Sir Edward Leigh: There is no hope.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: America is obviously our most important ally. It is the most important ally for all members of NATO. I was at the NATO national security advisers meeting the other day, and that realisation was very clear.

There are plenty of things that we can do without the Americans. For instance, within a NATO subset, we have something called the Joint Expeditionary Force where we train and can do certain things together.

But there is no question that there are certain types of mission that cannot realistically be undertaken without the Americans. Staying in Afghanistan unfortunately was one of those.

- Q12 **Lord King of Bridgwater:** Mr Tugendhat made the point that we knew as much about what was going on in Afghanistan as the Americans. Maybe you think the Americans knew more. I turn to Dominic Raab's phrase about the "optimism bias". A lot of the intelligence and advice that seems to have come to you came from people who had invested considerable effort and work into Afghanistan. They were then asked the question, "We've been training the army. Are they any good? You've put forward your case to put up lots of money to help support the army. Is their morale any good?" They are not likely to turn around and say, "Well, I think they're just likely to run away".

Look at DfID. The people who must have invested some of their lives and a considerable amount of public money in making the case for doing things in Afghanistan over 20 years are not the sort of people who are going to give you totally impartial advice as to whether it is a bit of a washout on balance. I do not know whether that is what he meant by "optimism bias".

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think that is almost exactly what he meant.

Lord King of Bridgwater: It seems to me it is a very telling point.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It is. It is one of the things that we are looking at as we do the lessons learned. Over 150,000 British troops have cycled through Afghanistan. A great many people have invested much of their career in Afghanistan, and we need to take that into account.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Politicians stood in front and said, "This is something well worth doing and we're going to see it through."

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I do not disagree.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Then 150,000 troops followed on.

- Q13 **Richard Graham:** The difficulty is that it seems, totally understandably, as if you are both trying to put as positive a gloss as possible on what was a strategic disaster, partly concealed by a very gallant withdrawal at the end. Looking at the letter you wrote, Sir Stephen, and trying to understand some of the strands of what happened, you say in it that NATO had agreed on 14 April that we would all withdraw our troops together and maintain our embassies afterwards. I think I heard you say that your overall assessment was a strong likelihood of at least a partial Taliban takeover. In that situation, what preparation had we made for all NATO missions to be closed at the same moment of the military withdrawal?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is a complicated question. On 14 April, the decision for NATO to withdraw did not imply that there would be no troops left on the ground. The belief at that time was that there would be sufficient American, British, Turkish and other NATO ally troops left on

the ground to protect the diplomatic footprint, whatever its configuration. It certainly was not all covered in the airport; that was not the ambition at the time. That was the central plan. Right through May, June and July, that was what we were planning on and hoping would come to pass.

Richard Graham: There was no preparation at that stage.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have not finished. If I may, that kind of lay-down is not incompatible with a Taliban-dominated Government. Of course, because of the various JIC assessments that said, "That is a central assessment, but it could be this or that", plans were also made, particularly through June, for the acceleration of Pitting if it did not go that way. There were contingency plans either way.

Richard Graham: In that context, how frustrated were you that, when our mission did close, there were still sensitive documents left inside? Were the plans not there? Were they not executed, or was there a problem? What went wrong?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: There is an as yet unfinished Foreign Office inquiry into that, so I do not want to prejudge it. To put it very mildly, it was extremely regrettable, potentially put lives at risk and should not have happened. I cannot be clearer than that.

Richard Graham: During August, it became very clear to all of us that there were differences of view in the MoD and the FCDO. What was the fundamental cause of that in your view? Was it, for example, over a difference of opinion about whether it was practical for anything to remain? How disruptive was that to a programme of sensible withdrawal?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It was not disruptive to a programme of sensible withdrawal. An accusation that is occasionally levelled at government is groupthink; we can definitely say that there was not groupthink in this instance. In a fast-moving, rather volatile situation, it is entirely legitimate for officials and Ministers to take different views of what is the best course of action. People have different risk appetites. The process of government, though, is to seek to accommodate those different viewpoints into a plan that can work. In very difficult circumstances and a situation that nobody wanted to see come about, that is ultimately what happened.

Richard Graham: I understand why you would come to that conclusion. None the less, it was too obvious and open for anyone in this room to have been unaware of it. That cannot be optimum for a situation of this kind, can it?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Usually, the less conflict in those kinds of discussions there is, the better. I am always very happy to listen to different viewpoints. There are moments at which that becomes too much.

Richard Graham: Is that one of the issues where there are lessons to be learned about how to bring a one-Government approach?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We will look into that, but I would re-emphasise that the process led by the Prime Minister, and the Cabinet Office on his behalf, was specifically designed to bring together disparate viewpoints with a view to a unified plan. You are suggesting that sometimes those viewpoints were too publicly disparate, and we will look into that.

Q14 **Darren Jones:** I am sure you will disagree with this characterisation, but I am concerned by the tone of what we are hearing today. But for the speed of events and the failure to remove sensitive data from our embassy, everything else sounds as if, from your perspective, it was perfectly defensible.

My concern is that, while this is a particularly egregious example, this committee has expressed a number of concerns over the past year about the functioning of the National Security Council; its preparations and implementations of plans for Covid; its risk assessment and implementation around Afghanistan; the amount of time the Prime Minister is now putting into the restructured delivery of the National Security Council meetings; the removal of prioritisation and tiers from the national security risk assessment; and the removal of members from the National Security Council such as the Business Secretary, who now has very wide national security powers but is no longer invited to the meetings.

My question is a short one. As the National Security Adviser, Sir Stephen, do you think everything is fine, or are there real, fundamental problems here that both you and the Prime Minister need to get a grip of?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I do not think everything is fine. We live in a complicated and dangerous world that is becoming more complicated and dangerous as time goes on. Do I think our restructured National Security Council arrangements are adequate to the task? Yes, and so does the Prime Minister. His aim is to allow the National Security Council to become a more strategic body and to have greater senior ministerial engagement through subgroups of the National Security Council, which will allow for a better and more comprehensive analysis of the various threats that we face.

The plans are well founded. None is likely to be perfect; very few things are in this world, and particularly this bit of the world. I do not believe we have a particularly flawed process at all.

Darren Jones: With that answer, you started off by saying that not everything is fine, but everything is fine. My question is whether, learning some lessons in particular from the Afghanistan situation, there needs to be a more structural or fundamental review that you report to this committee on. You have just said that your current plans and structure are fine.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I said that I think they are adequate to the tasks and threats that face us. We have done a restructuring recently, which the Prime Minister has approved. I am very happy to come back to

the committee in due course to report on how those structures are bedding down and whether they have made the improvements that we anticipate and hope that they will make.

Darren Jones: I am sure we will be grateful for that. Thank you.

Q15 **Tom Tugendhat:** May I briefly follow up on the point that Alicia raised? You met with the national security adviser of Afghanistan, Mr Mohib, on 22 July.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I did.

Tom Tugendhat: This was effectively after the withdrawal of US contractors from Bagram and the closure of the Bagram air base. What did he say?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I will not reveal everything that he said. He was principally concerned about the commentary in the western media that the decline of the Government in Afghanistan was inevitable. He thought that that was contributing to the lack of faith in the Government, and it was effectively becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. That was the principal point that he wanted to make to me.

Tom Tugendhat: His tweet says that you discussed various security issues and counterterrorism. After that meeting, did you retask the agencies and assets under your control to look at the risk of state failure alongside CT?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That process was already under way, so I did not need to do any of that.

Tom Tugendhat: When did you retweak from the focus on CT in Afghanistan?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I do not want to get into too much detail about how agencies do their work.

Tom Tugendhat: You asking questions is not the same as how they collect. You are quite right that how they collect is secret. If you do not want to talk about agencies, when did you ask the Government to focus on state failure rather than purely on counterterrorism?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The process of analysing how we were going to withdraw, what the likely futures for Afghanistan were going to be, and what the range of options was going to be brought into play the potential of state failure. Throughout that process, we evolved the kinds of analysis and collection we were doing as a result. It was a gradual process. There was not one watershed moment.

David Quarrey: As I mentioned earlier, in the process we had across the summer months, support to the Afghan state was one of those key lines of activity. We were looking at whether that was political support, diplomatic engagement, practical support or the work that we were still able to do with the Afghan security forces. It was there throughout. As

Stephen says, it might have adjusted in particular focus along the way, but it was there throughout.

- Q16 **Alicia Kearns:** You are currently reviewing and looking at processes, structures and what might be improved. Are any of our allies doing similar investigations, or are they are more content that their systems are apt? I recognise that we do not do intelligence in a silo; we work as part of Five Eyes and everything else. I would just be interested in whether there were any plans to intersect your reviews with any reviews partners might be doing, or whether we are the only ones reviewing it.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: NATO is doing a full drains-up lessons learned process. I would be astonished if our American colleagues are not, but I have not had that conversation with them. You may have done. For others, I cannot answer that question. It is a very good point, and I will take that away and find out whether they are doing them. If they are and we can compare notes, that has to be better than just doing it in a silo. I could not agree more.

- Q17 **Sir Edward Leigh:** I would argue that your questions or your answers about the National Security Council are completely complacent. Anybody would think from your answers that the planning committee of Lincolnshire County Council needs to better its processes. Can I remind you of what the former Chief of the Defence Staff Lord Richards has said, following the events in Afghanistan? He said that the National Security Council mechanism is "completely broken". Why do you think he reached that conclusion?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I do not know.

Sir Edward Leigh: I thought you would say that. It is an obvious answer, but it is not a satisfactory answer. I am not talking about Joe Soap airing off his opinions in the Dog and Duck in Scunthorpe. I am talking about the former Chief of the Defence Staff Lord Richards, who has spent all his life in the Armed Forces. He says that the National Security Council mechanism is "completely broken". You are refusing now to make any comment on that.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am not aware of the evidence upon which Lord Richards is—

Sir Edward Leigh: The evidence is the biggest diplomatic and military catastrophe since Suez.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I really cannot comment on Lord Richards' views, I am afraid.

Sir Edward Leigh: He says, "It's quite clear that this mechanism is completely broken. It needs a major overhaul to turn it from a 19th-century talking shop into a dynamic 21st-century cross-government co-ordination and communications centre that can handle domestic disasters such as Grenfell Tower as much as international crises of the kind we are witnessing so tragically and dangerously in Afghanistan". Is

that opinion right?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: There is potentially some confusion betrayed in that quotation between what the NSC and the COBR mechanisms are there for. Many of the things he talks about, such as the Grenfell fire and immediate domestic emergencies, are not really for the NSC. That is a strategic security council. The issues that he is referring to are really much more for the COBR mechanism.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is not a fair answer. He was focusing on Afghanistan. He may have mentioned Grenfell en passant, but he is focusing on trying to change it from a 19th-century talking shop to dynamic 21st-century cross-government co-ordination. We already know that there was a massive briefing war between the MoD and the Foreign Office, so that cross-government co-ordination does not work very well. We have already spent an hour discussing how your assessments were completely wrong, although you say other people got them equally wrong.

You need to tell us a bit more about how you are trying to reform this. We have just had this catastrophe. We have lost a war and abandoned hundreds of people who work for us. Our reputation is shot to pieces, so tell us now how you are going to reform the National Security Council.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I spent an hour and a half, a couple of months ago, talking to the committee about how we are reforming the National Security Council. We are making it more strategic, and we are making subgroups of senior Ministers beneath it, which are meeting more frequently in a more focused way. We then have another tier of official groups, which are charged with the implementation of the strategies that emerge from the strategic direction given by the Prime Minister and the NSC.

Some of the points that Lord Richards was making there relate to the way in which we are not optimising the use of data as we deal with complex crises. That is a perfectly reasonable criticism to make. It is not a criticism of the National Security Council; it is more a criticism of the way in which the rest of the machinery of government deals with the information that is coming into it, visualises the information that is coming into it, and seeks to get ahead of problems and head them off before they become major problems. Those are well understood questions that we are trying to deal with at the moment. We have just set up a situation centre to deal with some of the issues that Lord Richards has talked about.

Sir Edward Leigh: One point he makes that seems perfectly fair, and I am sure you agree with, is that "its core business would be obliging a politically focused group of strategically inexperienced and sometimes uninterested politicians to think, prepare and plan long term and strategically". Is that a fair comment? Are you now training people such as the Prime Minister to be interested and plan strategically?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: You will not be surprised, Sir Edward, that that is not a characterisation I would agree with.

David Quarrey: Can I just say, on the National Security Council and Afghanistan, that it did what it was supposed to do? It set clear direction to the system at various points through the process; it did so again in early September in the meeting that Sir Stephen described earlier. It set a hierarchy of UK priorities that the system is now pursuing, and that is what we need the council to do, to give political direction to our system to then take forward. It did that earlier in the crisis. It set the clear direction that we wanted to stay and wanted a continuing presence there.

It was not the fault of the National Security Council that that did not happen. The political direction had been set. There was a much more complex picture out there in terms of how we were delivering it. At key moments in the process, the National Security Council gave the political direction that the system needed.

Sir Edward Leigh: As you are answering the question so obligingly, why did Lord Richards say it was completely broken?

David Quarrey: You will have to ask Lord Richards.

The Chair: As you will be aware, I am afraid the committee is not entirely enthusiastic about the changes that have been proposed, which indeed you reported to us at the last meeting. You said a moment ago that the committees will meet more frequently in a more focused way. As I understand it, these other committees and, indeed, the NSC itself are going to meet only every two weeks. Originally, the National Security Council met every week, at least when Parliament was sitting. We have expressed some concerns about the pattern and frequency of these new meetings. I just thought I ought to put that on the record.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think it is the Prime Minister's view that frequency does not automatically equate to strategic insight.

Sir Edward Leigh: He cannot be bothered to turn up.

The Chair: I understand that that may well be the Prime Minister's view. Thank you, Sir Stephen.

Q18 **Richard Graham:** Moving away from the detail of what I have characterised, and I hope not unfairly, as a strategic disaster partly mitigated by this gallant withdrawal—if you like, Dunkirk in a different context—to the bigger picture of how we arrive at a more coherent, integrated approach to the big strategic questions that the NSC is inevitably looking at, there are quite a lot of bigger challenges in the integrated review around this. If you look at the language of our relationship with China, for example, there are clearly different elements to it, reflecting both things that are positive and things that could be very negative.

How do we manage to get a really effective, integrated strategy on these

big issues in the IR? Are there any lessons from the Afghanistan issue that are relevant, or it a slightly different, almost “another era”-type conflict that will not necessarily have great lessons for some of these bigger geopolitical issues?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is a very interesting question. The IR sought to bring out some of the highly complex, interrelated questions that are giving rise to security challenges at the moment. You are right; the issue of China is probably the most complex of all where, as you say, there are pros and cons. We do not have, in the substrategies of the integrated review—and there are 22 of those with specific lines of responsibility, senior officials and Ministers—any that feel quite like Afghanistan because we do not have those kinds of situations at the moment. I suppose the closest is likely to be Iraq. Some of them are much more thematic than that. It is that integrated nature of these questions that we are trying to get at, to then create strategy and operationalise that strategy through the integrated review.

David Quarrey: I agree with that. There are many lessons that I am sure we can learn from Afghanistan. I am not sure how relevant they will be to the biggest strategic challenges coming towards us in the next few years.

The Chair: I am afraid we have a Division in the House. Thank you very much indeed for coming to give evidence to us today. There are in particular some questions we were hoping to ask you about the integrated review that we will follow up in writing. I understand there are five Divisions, so there is no prospect that we will be back in time to meet your availability. Thank you for coming today.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, members of the committee.