HOUSE OF COMMONS

# Defence Committee

## Oral evidence: Work of the Chief of Defence Staff, HC 842

Tuesday 9 November 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1-126

### Witness

I: General Sir Nick Carter GCB CBE DSO ADC Gen, Chief of Defence Staff, Ministry of Defence.

# Examination of witness

Witness: General Sir Nick Carter.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Defence Committee hearing on Tuesday 9 November 2021. I am delighted to welcome General Sir Nick Carter, CDS, who is giving us a valedictory session as the outgoing Chief of the Defence Staff. Sir, you are very welcome indeed. I am just looking through your CV. You signed up in 1977, during the cold war, and have had a number of jobs. The world looks very different now; it has experienced a few revolutions. You have served in Germany, Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan. You served in some senior roles in Afghanistan, which we will turn to almost immediately. Given that this is your final time, I hope that you are going to be as open and frank as you would like to be, this being your valedictory, and will perhaps share with us your reflections on your time in the Armed Forces and particularly as Chief of the Defence Staff. As I said, sir, you are very welcome indeed.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Thank you; it is good to be with you. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to make some opening remarks and, indeed, to have a valedictory session. Yes, after 45 years' service, it will be an interesting moment, moving over to the other side of the fence on 1 December. There will be lots of opportunities, I am sure, but one will also look back with much fondness on what one has achieved and done.

Focusing on my three and a half years as Chief of the Defence Staff, when I took over on 11 June 2018, I realised pretty quickly that there was work to be done in terms of getting the defence budget into the right place, because I had a session with Prime Minister May and the Chancellor, Philip Hammond, eight days later, on 19 June 2018, and it became very clear to me that it was necessary to explain the extent to which the threat had evolved, even since the previous SDSR in 2015, and also the extent to which our defence programme and our Armed Forces were hollow, in order to deal with that particular threat. This was all part of something that you will recall, called the Modernising Defence Programme, which fell out of the NSA's national security capability review. It was the time when Gavin Williamson was the Defence Secretary. And of course we were having a slightly hand-to-mouth existence in defence, because some rather optimistic assumptions in the 2015 SDSR had led to a realisation that the efficiency that the Department was supposed to deliver was not necessarily going to equip us for what we needed in terms of the defence programme.

That began my realisation that over the next two and a half to three years of my tenure as CDS, it was going to be vital to make the argument for why we needed more resources. As you know, that played out to our advantage, with a very favourable settlement in November of last year in the spending review, where importantly we got a multi-year settlement. Of course, what is important in the context of a multi-year settlement is that in our business, where you can't just live for tomorrow, you have to live

for the day after tomorrow and the day after that as well, it is important to be able to plan out to 2030.

And fundamentally, as far as I am concerned, we now find ourselves in a good position, in that we know what the ends are, because the integrated review published in March '18 explains that for us. We know what the means are, as I have just been describing, but importantly we also know what the ways are. If you are going to win the argument for more resources in Defence, fundamentally it needs to be underpinned by the conceptual component of fighting power, hence the importance of this little book, the "Integrated Operating Concept". It essentially explains that we are now, in terms of the threat, up against opponents who regard the geostrategic context as a context that is a continuous struggle in which all the instruments of statecraft, whether that is diplomacy or nuclear weapons, can be used, unconstrained by any distinction between peace and war.

That means that we have to have a much more competitive outlook in terms of how the Armed Forces are used and in terms of how defence places itself in the world in which we now find ourselves. That means that we must become readier and more resilient—resilience is a big lesson, as I am sure that we have all learned from what took place during covid—but it also requires us to think about, for example, how we would mobilise a reserve and how we would obtain 35,000 individuals from the operational reserve to give us the resilience that we need for war fighting. It requires us to think. Richard will remember from the cold war what it was like to bomb burst out of barracks to find a survival area.

**Richard Drax:** That is if we got to the gate without breaking down, General.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** That was also true.

We also have to understand that your air force may not have the luxury of being able to fight from defended air bases. These are all things that we need to relearn given the nature of the threat.

Importantly, it is also about modernising. That is where we had to be bold during the course of the integrated review. We coined the paradigm, "Sunset and sunrise" and what we have unashamedly had to do is to take some risk against capabilities that were in the programme to take them out of service in order to create the headroom to be able to invest for the future—capabilities such as C-130, the Puma helicopter, Warrior, and the Type 23. You will know them well. These are things that are not in the sunrise vision for defence and therefore it was logical to take some of this stuff out of service to create that headroom. We need to recognise that, in modernising the Armed Forces, the battlefield of the 2030s will be a very different battlefield. There are some weak signals from what we have seen over the past couple of years in Azerbaijan, for example, but it will be about a combination between hiding and finding. It will be about trying to get your forces to be much better connected in order to be able to maximise their effect. We will get on to this when you want to talk about

multi-domain integration, but that requires a different approach both in terms of technology and people, but also doctrine and process.

Looking ahead, that is fundamental. I would describe it as active deterrence. I would also say that we need to think hard about how we manage escalation these days because some of the capabilities that our opponents have now developed, whether that is hypersonics or other missile systems, make it very difficult to understand how escalation is working and we need to think hard about that. Many of us who grew up in the cold war will remember that we became quite proficient at managing escalation, but escalation is now much harder. It is no longer a single ladder that you move up and down; it is much more of a spider's web of multiple levels, with multiple domains, and some of those domains are very hard to attribute, whether that is space or cyber. Understanding escalation management is an issue.

Fundamentally, it is also about making sure that we match our words and our deeds together. That is very easy to say, and it is much easier for our authoritarian rivals to do because they do not worry too much about free speech and democratic principles, as we do. In democracies, trying to match words and deeds to achieve that effect in relation to your opponents is extraordinarily challenging to do.

This is also about allies and partners. Where we have an advantage over the sorts of countries that I am talking about is that they have clients—they do not have friends. We have allies and partners, and we should never lose sight of the importance of defence diplomacy in building the relationships that we need to achieve that. As Chief of the Defence Staff, I am proud of what we have done with our Joint Expeditionary Force—that is the force that we have pulled together from the three Baltic states, and now the five Nordics, with Iceland and the Netherlands having joined. A combination of nine like-minded countries and ourselves is definitely meeting the threat that Russia is presenting in a unified fashion but, importantly, also in a fashion that does not necessarily have to worry about article 5 of the NATO treaty. It is one that recognises that you will be engaged below the threshold of war and we understand that collectively.

I am also very proud of the group of middle eastern chiefs of defence that we have pulled together—the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries combined with Iraq, and also with Jordan and Egypt. We met last Monday on board HMS Queen Elizabeth off the coast of Muscat, and we had extraordinarily constructive conversations—ones in which you realise that UK leadership and UK convening power matter in that part of the world, particularly with those countries. We have spread that effect further afield with an equal group from the Caribbean. Of course, in the very competitive world in which we live now, it is important that you develop these relationships, because, in developing those relationships, it gives you an edge when it comes to the global competition that we are confronted with, whether that is for reasons of security and stability to prevent strategic vacuums, or whether it is about British prosperity.

Where there is much work still to be done is in the people domain. I hope that we will come back to this, because there are many important issues that we should talk about. If we are going to be fit for purpose in the 2030s, we need to recognise that the skills we will require in that timeframe will be rather different to the skills that we have all grown up with. The balance between specialists and generalists will shift; there will be far more specialists. Generalists will have to become much better customers and clients of specialists, to understand the possibilities of what specialists have to offer.

However, it means that our wonderful career structure, which you would still recognise, is not a clear structure that is really fit for purpose, because we still believe in rewarding, incentivising and remunerating people on the basis of promotion through a rank structure, and if your expertise is cyber, you don't necessarily want to rise to the rank of whatever in order to be effectively rewarded. We need to find other ways of dealing with those sorts of specialities and that is a work in progress.

What we also need to recognise is that a career structure that has over 300 different career employment groups across the three services is too complex and challenging to recruit to in the future. It needs to be matched, through a common skills framework, to the outside world, so that we can become better able to share skills with the outside world and better able to have lateral entry, which will make all of that occur.

Of course, what we also need to do is to acknowledge that some of these professions need to be managed not just on a single-service basis but rather in a unified career management process across all three services. It makes no sense to have different cyber professions, for example, in each of the three services.

We also need to recognise that our conceptual input to the career structure is still designed for the cold war, and our education—our joint professional military education at staff college and things like that—has got to be modernised, to make it more effective to do that. It is happening incrementally, but we probably need to be more bold than we are at the moment. And one of the things that I have invested in as a CDS is to have a group of CDS scholars, as I call them, at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, which recognises people who are choosing a particular path in terms of what they are trying to achieve in relation to these new skills.

We have also adjusted some of the ways that we train people, so that the Army's advanced development programme, which is a model for defence, is now training and educating people to make it better able for them to "run the business" in what is a much more complex set of programmes. We all know how the Ministry of Defence struggles with some programmes, but we need to work out how we train people to become better able to run these programmes. That is a slightly different skillset to the one that you might need to war fight.

Fundamentally, we also need to recognise that we have to become much better able to maximise everybody's talent. You might want to call that diversity and inclusion, or combating bullying, harassment and discrimination. It matters not. It is fundamentally about maximising everybody's talent, and that is where we still have cultural challenges to overcome.

Against all of that backdrop, I cannot remember a global strategic context that was more dynamic and more complex. We saw that, of course, with the Ides of August this year in Afghanistan, but I could list probably 20 different places which one is having to monitor on a daily basis at the moment. Of course, Ethiopia and Sudan are now in the news, but you can look further afield to places like Mozambique and recognise that the world is now a very challenging environment. Also, it is one that is very different to the one that I grew up in, during the cold war. That brings with it significant challenges for our Armed Forces: the level of commitment that they sustain; and the extent to which they will be engaged in some of these environments.

So, pulling all of that together, the stuff that we will say privately at the end, which I hope you will find helpful, to my mind the two big challenges that my successor has to wrestle with are, first and foremost, how you create the right strategic culture, the right strategic posture and the right way of operating and fighting, which will be fit for purpose for this very global, competitive environment in which we have to operate. It is like playing multi-dimensional checkers. Violent extremism is straightforward; it is one issue. This is like playing multi-dimensional checkers.

Then the second big challenge that he has to wrestle with is how we modernise at the pace of relevance. That gets right into the system of acquisition, technology, the importance of experimentation and picking the right mix of capabilities for that battlefield of the 2030s, in all of the five operational domains of space, cyber, maritime, land and air.

So, thank you for that opportunity. I look forward to taking your questions.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed, General. There is lots to pick over there. Before we go into Afghanistan as our first major subject, I just want to speak about the growing threats that we face, because you summarised the increasing concern about state and non-state actors, and both conventional and non-conventional. Would you agree that the next 10 years, under the current trajectory, will become more challenging, not less, and more unstable, not less?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I don't know whether it will become more unstable, but I think the threats that we are seeing today will be even more evident as the decade unfolds.

Q3 **Chair:** The question is, looking at the Budget that was announced two weeks ago—I know every Department always wants to have more money and you want to have more money. Reading table 1.16, the defence

budget over the next four years actually decreases by 0.4%. The world that you are spelling out, the challenges that we face, and the ambitions that you would like to see Britain participate in, suggest that we are remaining on a peacetime budget, which means that our Armed Forces will be ever more tested to meet the obligations and challenges that you speak about.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, and the first point I would make, and make very firmly, is that our security is assured through our membership of NATO. What is very important is that we continue to do the good work that we are doing to help modernise the alliance and make it as effective as possible. It may surprise you to know that British thought leadership was at the heart of the NATO military strategy that was published in 2018. It was at the heart of the concept that SACEUR produced for the deterrents and defence of the Euro-Atlantic area, and it was at the heart of the NATO warfighting concept that has been produced by ACT in Norfolk. I think that process will lead to much better understood regional plans but will also lead to allies increasingly being incentivised to modernise all their Armed Forces in the context of the five operational domains I describe. It will make NATO into an alliance that will be far better able to deal with the challenges of the next 10 years than would have been the case if we had looked back, particularly to pre-2012. We need to recognise that we assure our security through working with allies and partners—that is the first and most important point.

The second most important point—I have read the evidence that Committees such as the PAC have taken in terms of how we spend our money and how we deliver effect through our equipment programme. The plain fact—we all know this—is that we can do a better job on that. How we maximise the potential with the money that we already get is something that I think we should all be conscious of and that we should all be striving to improve. That is a really important issue that we need to reflect on.

**Chair:** Sorry to—

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** May I finish? On your last point, absolutely. One would like more money, not least because you would be mad if you did not ask for it, but you have to make the case and you have to make the argument.

Q4 **Chair:** On that last point, do we do a good enough job of explaining to the British people the very threats that you have already been articulating and that we are going to explore even further? There are many on this Committee who believe that the defence budget—the extra £2.2 billion—is not enough. That is not just because of threats that are coming over the horizon. It is also because of the place that Britain would like to assume—the leadership role and the statecraft that we need to exhibit to be able to meet the myriad challenges that are taking place. If we made a better case to the British people, it is more likely that there will be support for seeing that budget increased.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, and I have said throughout my eight years as a chief of staff that the great problem the Armed Forces have is that our popularity is so often measured in sympathy and not in empathy. Explaining what we do and why we are needed is a really important role for all of us, and what I find gratifying is that the number of parliamentarians who have service experience seems to be growing. That can be only a good thing, because that will hopefully make the connection to the society that is ultimately going to pay the tax bill.

**Chair:** Thank you for that. Unfortunately, NATO is a bit bruised at the moment because of Afghanistan, as are our Armed Forces, so let's now explore what happened there. I turn to Stuart to take us forward.

Q5 **Stuart Anderson:** It is nice to see you, general. I think I have put it on the record that we served together in the past—I need to make that clear. I also want to say something, as it is the last time you will be in front of us. I have spoken in the Chamber about how I veered off the track and ended up getting a second chance. Obviously, we know it was you who gave me that second chance, so I just want to say thank you for doing that many years ago.

Niceties aside, I want to go on to Afghanistan. In July, you stated that the UK and NATO had not been defeated in Afghanistan. Looking at the country today, do you regret saying that, or do you stand by that?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Like so much in life, it is too early to say, not least because, of course, NATO is a military alliance and, ultimately, the problem in Afghanistan is a political problem. What I would say is that, since 2001, the Afghan population has expanded significantly, and 60% of the population has been born since 2001. What those individuals have experienced is something very different from what their parents experienced before 2001. They have seen what a modern state can offer for them, whether that is utilities, infrastructure, the internet, a mobile phone network, electronic banking. They have been offered all those things, but in particular they have been offered education. They know what a civil society can be like.

I believe that the Taliban Government that is now governing recognise that. I suspect that we will come back to them more specifically, but the reality is that they are different from Taliban 1.0—Taliban 2.0 is different. There are a lot of people in Taliban 2.0 who would like to take greater account of what I've just said and to govern in a more modern way, but they are divided among themselves, as political entities so often are. In being divided among themselves, there is inevitably an element that wants to be more repressive and to be more conservative in its application of sharia law and all that goes with it. But if the less repressive elements end up gaining greater control, and if the 60% of Afghans that I have described are better able to influence them, then there is no reason to suppose that Afghanistan over the next five years might not turn into a country that is more inclusive than it might have been otherwise.

It is too early to say that defeat has occurred. Victory here needs to be measured in the results, not in some great military extravaganza. Funnily enough, that has always been the case in this part of the world. There is a wonderful book that Winston Churchill wrote at the end of the 19th century about a field force that he accompanied up into the northern areas of what is now Pakistan. In that book he observed, rightly, that victory is definitely not measured through battle; it is measured through long-term results and effects. I suspect that when we look back on the last 20 years, and we then look forward in 20 years' time, Afghanistan may be a very different country, so it is too early to say that it is defeated.

I would also say, speaking very parochially as a military officer who fought at the tactical level in Afghanistan at least twice and for a long period of time, that we were never defeated on the battlefield. What unravelled the whole effort was the political context in which all this was conducted. Ministers who were involved at the time will know exactly what I mean. It was the politics of it that were very challenging to resolve. In terms of the battlefield, however, I am extremely proud of what our Armed Forces achieved on that battlefield, and they were never defeated by a very cunning, ruthless and innovative opponent.

Q6 **Stuart Anderson:** We have talked about the strategic level, and we have talked about the battlefield. We are approaching Armistice Day, which will be a very hard time for many veterans. Over those two decades, there was a lot of loss of life and major trauma—injuries—that will go on for veterans for many years. A lot of those veterans feel that they fought in vain. What do you say to those veterans?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** In a way, much of what I have just said is what you could say to them. I think you could particularly say to them that they were never defeated on that battlefield. I have never met anybody who served under me who wouldn't have gone to Afghanistan if they—they wanted to go. They wanted to serve alongside their mates. They wanted to do what they were trained to do. I think that that is what people should hold dear.

All of us have lost friends and have friends who have been brutally wounded, either mentally or physically. Not a day goes by when I don't think of the 375 soldiers who lost their lives under my command between 2009 and 2010, and not a day goes by when I don't think more broadly about the 460-odd Brits who lost their lives as well. The plain fact is that things don't always turn out the way that you hope they'll turn out, but we have to be patient. That is often the way with counter-insurgencies and these sorts of very political involvements.

Q7 **Stuart Anderson:** When I was newly elected to the Committee, I remember you saying, the first time you sat in front of us, how many people quote Sun Tzu's "The Art of War". There has been much political debate about the intelligence and the fact that we never saw the rise so quickly of the Taliban. If you look back to Sun Tzu, he talks about the morale of troops and how you could see which side was going to gain advantage. Do you think the Afghan army was given enough

consideration at the time? What have we learned from this so that we never put ourselves in another situation like it?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** As I referred to in my opening remarks, we talk about fighting power being about the conceptual, the physical and the moral. If you analyse the Afghan national army, there are some profound questions to be asked about the moral component of that army. There are some big questions to ask about why it was vulnerable, but if you take any army and remove all its contractual support, all the people who were providing it with advice on sustainability and logistics and all its air power, it is quite clearly going to be vulnerable.

I suspect you are also wondering why I—the CDS—was, as one of your Committee members, Kevan Jones, said to Ben Wallace when he gave evidence to you on 26 October, so "bullish" even as late as 5 August. Well, you are communicating to multiple audiences. Of course, the plan was to try to get the Afghan Government to hang in there and hold it together, and if I had said what I have just said about the moral component, knowing that I was very much listened to in Afghanistan and Pakistan—I am one of the voices that they listen to, probably more so than any other foreigner, other than maybe the odd American—I would have definitely undermined them even more than they were already undermined. You are communicating to multiple audiences.

The reality, as is so often the case in Afghanistan—it is exactly what happened in 2001, when the CIA came in with suitcases full of dollars—is that they buy their way into power. What was going on in the provincial capitals of Herat, Lashkar Gah and Kandahar, all the way up to Ghazni, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad, was that millions of dollars were changing hands. There wasn't any fighting, except in Lashkar Gah. That is a very Afghan way of buying allegiance. What happened was that allegiance changed over a period of a week, and it is very hard to monitor that if you are not actually on the ground and seeing it happening. We now know—I certainly know this from my Afghan network—that that was what happened. It was the traditional Afghan way of achieving an effect: you buy allegiance. I do not think that was easy for intelligence to predict. Yes, there were questions about judgment and how quickly it all happened but, to be fair to the analysts, most people thought that the Afghan Government would not hack it; it was just a question of how long it would take before it fell.

I draw your attention to a very interesting interview that TOLO TV—which is still going in Afghanistan; it is really commendable that media are still happening there—conducted with Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesman for the Taliban. In that interview, Mujahid explains that they were completely amazed that they ended up where they ended up: at the gates of Kabul on 14 August. What they had hoped would happen—he says this very clearly—is that they would stop short of Kabul and there would then be a negotiation. All the Government institutions would remain ticking over, effectively, there would be a conversation between their leadership and President Ghani, and there would be a transition. That is what they hoped for. Of course, as we know, that did not happen: a vacuum was created by

the absence of President Ghani on that Sunday morning, 15 August. The upshot of all that was that the thing collapsed. The Taliban did not want that; they wanted a transition that meant they could keep going the people who had been trained to help to run Government institutions. It is instructive that they hung on to the mayor of Kabul, who did not leg it, because they knew that he understood how to run a city of 6 million people.

We need to be careful about blaming intelligence. It was all questions of judgment, and I do not know anybody in my vast network of Afghans who expected President Ghani to leg it and expected what actually unfolded at the pace at which it did.

Q8 **Chair:** Basic errors were made: western-style government was introduced six years before we really started to train Afghan forces; there was a failure to negotiate with and bring the Taliban to the table until 2018; and at the Doha talks the Afghan Government were not even included. Are those not reasons to help those who, on Remembrance Day, will be thinking of their loved ones who are missing and reasons for us to have an inquiry into what went wrong in Afghanistan?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** There are lots of lessons that we can learn from this. However, if we are going to have an inquiry, we want to be really careful about what exam question we ask, because I do not think anybody would say that the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 was in any way illegal or unjust.

You will recall that there was a UN Security Council resolution and that it happened a month after bin Laden had done what bin Laden did, and you will recall that even article 5 was put on the table. So I do not think there was ever a question about the legality of that or the reason for doing it. The political objective at the time was relatively straightforward. It was essentially about malleting bin Laden and getting rid of al-Qaeda.

Of course, the interesting question to ask is how the political objectives evolved from that relatively straightforward political objective into one that became nation building. I do not know anything about that. I was a lowly colonel at the time, and I was not involved in any of the decision-making process. But that is an interesting question to reflect on.

There are all sorts of good questions about how the campaign evolved after that. These are questions not just for the UK, but for NATO as a whole and particularly for our American partner. Our American partner carried most of the water in this campaign, so if we are going to do it, we need to recognise that.

Q9 **Chair:** I agree that the parameters would need to be carefully constructed. You touch on something of absolute importance, because I think Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney have a lot to answer for in that political decision making. The question for Britain is, why didn't we, with all our knowledge and experience of Afghanistan, step in, whisper in their ear and say, "By the way, why don't we do it this way?"

In 2009, in his 60-page analysis, General McChrystal observed that we did not understand the people at that stage, "whose needs, identities and grievances" can differ "from valley to valley"; that ISAF and NATO were "poorly configured for COIN" operations, still designed instead for conventional; that we were killing the enemy but not shielding the people; and that not enough was being done to train indigenous forces. That was in 2009, which is why this Committee and others are asking for an inquiry.

You touched on other areas of the world where there are problems. We may be required to do this again, yet here we are, arguably the biggest and most powerful military alliance ever formed, defeated by an insurgency armed with AK47s and RPGs.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I would come back on the point about defeat, because I think it is too early to say that.

**Chair:** We walked away from the battlefield.

Q10 **Mr Francois:** Are you saying that we won?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, I'm not.

Q11 **Mr Francois:** Was it a victory?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, I answered the question over here, Mr Francois. In answering that question, what I said was that I think that it is possible that you could find that Afghanistan does not necessarily descend into a morass. In a sense, that would be a success for the international community.

Q12 **Mr Francois:** How many women are in the Taliban Cabinet?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Sorry, I missed the question.

**Mr Francois:** I will come back to it later.

**Chair:** We are going to digress if we go there. I think we have covered that, so let us now turn to the evacuation operation, Operation Pitting.

Q13 **Richard Drax:** General, welcome. It is very nice to see you. I must put on record that we are contemporaries, albeit in different regiments. We served Queen and country together for a while.

Can we look at Operation Pitting and that evacuation? You are quoted as saying on 28 August: "It has gone as well as it could do in the circumstances...but we haven't been able to bring everybody out and that has been heartbreaking, and there have been some very challenging judgements that have had to be made on the ground."

We have a lot more questions and I do not want to dally too much on this particularly, because hindsight is a wonderful thing, but as a former soldier, it struck me that, first, there was a lot of kerfuffle between the Foreign Office and the MoD, which wasn't helping on the ground; secondly, the Americans decided to go, and obviously we couldn't stay and we had to stick to their timeline; and, thirdly, the way we went

strategically, leaving only one airport as a way out, rather than keeping Bagram, which we could defend and which has been defended for many, many years, and was probably far easier to defend than the international airport. Why was only one airport left for you to get out from?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** First and foremost, the tactical commander who made that judgment was an American—four-star General Miller. Bagram itself, some 34 km north of Kabul, is certainly a place that you can defend and, in terms of its infrastructure, is impressively found. The challenge would have been getting your evacuees from Kabul to Bagram. I think the tactical commander took the judgment that you were better off focusing and concentrating on Kabul.

Q14 **Richard Drax:** Operation Pitting was a scramble, wasn't it? What is your view as a soldier about the operation itself?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** A range of views. First and foremost, I was proud of the way we did what we did. We started planning it back in January of this year. Once President Biden made his decision in April, we let contracts and brought things to life. We identified where we would have our temporary safe location in Dubai, and worked out where we were going to have our evacuation handling centre, at the Baron Hotel, which became quite famous.

We had a good plan. When it was time, at necessarily very short notice, to enact that plan, things swung into motion very effectively, certainly from a military perspective. Yes, there are challenges about operating across Whitehall, but in terms of the military part of that plan, I am very proud of the way it was executed and planned, and what we achieved through the course of it.

Q15 **Richard Drax:** You started planning in January and then learned in April that you had only a certain time to get out. What did you know in January when you started planning for the evacuation?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** What we knew in January was that there was a new American Administration. What we didn't know was whether the new American Administration would go with the Trump deal—in other words, we would have to leave by 1 May, which was the Trump deal that was signed on 29 February the previous year.

That was why one started to make contingency plans, because one didn't know which way that decision was going to go. Then, of course, in the third week of April, President Biden made his decision. At that point, we realised that 31 August was going to be a thing.

We didn't, of course, know that the Afghan Government was going to collapse, but it clearly had to be one of the scenarios that we had as a worst case. As you will well remember from your career, one tends to work on the basis of ensuring that you have a worst-case plan as well as a better-case plan. The worst-case plan for us was that we would need to evacuate.

Q16 **Richard Drax:** The questions, I seem to recall, both politically and

militarily, were that we did not do enough to persuade the US to hold on for longer. We rather just rolled over and did what they said. What did you do, from the military perspective? Did you try to ensure that more time was given for the evacuation, for example? What influence did you have—or not—with the Americans?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I'll quote what I said on 27 January, at the NATO Chiefs of Defence meeting in Brussels, which was before Biden's decision: "The simple physics of withdrawal tell us that we cannot be out of Afghanistan in good order by 1 May. As military leaders, none of us can be content with the current security situation on the ground, nor the direction of travel. It is obvious to everyone that the conditions specified in the 29 February agreement are not being met…Withdrawal under these circumstances would be perceived as a strategic victory for the Taliban, which would weaken the Alliance and embolden extremists the world over. We should, therefore, make a virtue out of necessity. So, in accepting that we shall be in Afghanistan beyond 1 May, our military advice to the NAC and our Ministers should be that we stay to buy time for a better political outcome, which may require a different political plan." So I was already indicating that we needed to think differently about what was happening.

Q17 **Richard Drax:** I am sorry—you were you indicating that we should stay. Is that what you were saying?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I was indicating that we needed a slightly different plan from the one we had. Indeed, I was indicating that we needed to reflect, to try to influence American decision making, that there might be merit in us thinking about staying beyond what eventually became 31 August, but certainly beyond 1 May.

Q18 **Richard Drax:** Along the lines expressed by my colleague and hon. Friend Tom Tugendhat in his excellent speech. We could have made it a permanent base.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I will come back to that. You will recall that when the Biden decision was made, I was interviewed on the "Today" programme, in which I said it wasn't the decision we were hoping for, although I obviously respected the fact that it was an adjustment in the United States' strategic posture. I have been consistent on this throughout my time. In terms of the posture we would have to adopt, it was as I said in that intervention: "I am in no doubt that we can provide adequate protection within constraints of the current Resolute Support operational plan."

I also observed that our forces would be under a very different threat because, of course, the deal with the Taliban—the Khalilzad deal—said that by 31 August we had to be out. If we had stayed beyond 31 August, we would have become protagonists again and we would have had to have got used to that. That would have involved more casualties and a greater level of intense military activity.

Q19 **Richard Drax:** I do not want dwell long on this, but I want to be clear and to come back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and

Malling was suggesting. On casualties, I think I am being accurate in saying that no one had been killed for over a year—that is as I recall it. The Afghan army was getting more proficient, and it had the support of NATO and aeroplanes in the sky and special forces on the ground. Are you saying that had we given it another 10 or 15 years, we could have turned it round and perhaps the story in Afghanistan could have had a very different ending? Is that what you are suggesting?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, I am not. I am saying that if we had gone back and revisited the political strategy, which we would have to have done, and if we had accepted therefore that the military would have needed to stay to help that political strategy be executed, that might have been a course of action that Governments could have adopted, but in so doing, we would have to recognise that the Taliban would be disappointed that the deal had not been signed up to and they would have turned us into protagonists again, which we would have had to accept.

Q20 **Richard Drax:** How are the military continuing to support eligible Afghans not yet relocated to the UK?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** If you will excuse me, I am not going to comment on how we are connected to Afghans inside Afghanistan. When Afghans get to third countries, as we saw the other day when we evacuated 311 Afghans, the answer is that we are providing military aircraft and military support to get them home if necessary

Q21 **Richard Drax:** Okay, so that operation is going well is it?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Sorry, it was 355 we moved from third countries. The answer is that there are still, I guess, 300-odd whom we would like to see leave Afghanistan, but challenge is how you achieve that.

Q22 **Richard Drax:** It must be a very deep sense of sadness to you that men, and consequently their women, who served us loyally for many years have been left behind.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Absolutely. During the month of August, from the point at which Kabul fell, I was receiving probably 20 to 30 messages from different people every day, and it was gut-wrenching.

Q23 **Richard Drax:** And how are they now? Do you know?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Many of them have now been evacuated. I do not know of more than one family that I personally know who are still in Afghanistan.

Q24 **Richard Drax:** Are they being tracked down and mistreated and killed by the Taliban now?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Not by the Government per se. The Government do not have a policy of vendetta. This is much more about local scores.

**Richard Drax:** Okay, thank you very much.

Q25 **Chair:** General, may I ask why the RAF Regiment was not mobilised?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** When we made the plan, I think the realisation was that if we were going to have to secure Kabul airfield, this was going to be a threat that was from the ground, not an air defence problem.

Q26 **Chair:** Isn't this what the RAF Regiment train for? I think they are feeling a bit bruised at the moment that they were not included.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I am sure that that may well be right, but as things stood at the time the plan was made, the capabilities were put on the table for what the plan needed to be and it was viewed that that particular capability was not necessary to deliver what we eventually delivered.

Q27 **Chair:** Of the three aircraft, the Hercules, C-17 and A400, I understand that the Hercules performed exceptionally well. Is that correct?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes.

Q28 **Chair:** Is there scope then to reconsider whether you should be terminating its use?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No.

Q29 **Chair:** Do you want to expand on that?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, the A400 is coming into service and the defence plan sees the A400 taking over all of the roles of the C-130. Yes, it would be wonderful to be able to have the C-130 in the inventory, but the reality is, as I said before, that we need to live within our means.

Q30 **Chair:** It is a financial thing, rather than an operational—

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** It is a financial judgment; the Defence Secretary took that call earlier this year.

Q31 **Chair:** My final question on this is to do with ammunition. As soon as the Americans decided that they were going to pull out, they also pulled out their contractors, which meant that the delivery—the logistical supply chains to the Afghans—was very clearly going to dry up. For many, that is the real reason why the Afghan forces dropped their guns, got rid of their uniforms and headed back to their families—it is because that is the way Afghanistan does things when the winds of change are very, very clear. Why didn't we—or did we—flag this up with the Americans to say, "This is going to end with the Taliban routing right across the country."?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I am not aware that the ammunition supply chain was in any way adjusted—I am not aware of that. What I am aware of is that the contractors who provide the engineering support to their air force moved to the middle east and provided that support remotely, as we have all learned to do during covid. I think that that was probably much more of a factor in terms of combat power than what you are describing.

**Chair:** The Taliban are now in power. We face a very difficult and challenging winter, with a humanitarian crisis unfolding. Derek, do you

want to take us forward on this?

Q32 **Derek Twigg:** Before I come to that, General Sir Nick, may I express my appreciation for your record and your service to our country? Before I come to the Chair's question, I want to go back to a point you made, which I keep hearing. We had this discussion with the Secretary of State. You said that we were not militarily defeated on the battlefield. No one is in any doubt about the bravery and resilience of our Armed Forces personnel and what they did in Afghanistan. What would you say to people who say that we were not defeated militarily on the battlefield, but it is still a loss because, as the Taliban have said on the record on numerous occasions, they were going to outlast us, and they did so. The use of Armed Forces is an extension of political will, so is it a defeat overall?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** What I have to do as the leader of the Armed Forces is lead the Armed Forces. Of course, in doing that, I have to be positive because it is about morale and our own moral component. I am on the record as having said over the last month that this was not the outcome that we wanted in any sense at all, but I am also not going to be nakedly in your face about defeat, because I want to be positive for those people, whom I hugely respect, who have given of their blood and treasure in this campaign.

Q33 **Derek Twigg:** I agree with that completely. As a Minister, I visited the many service personnel who had been wounded or injured both in Afghanistan and Iraq in the various hospitals and rehabilitation centres in this country. Their bravery and what they did is remarkable, but—this is what some people would say as well—given that what we had in Afghanistan was the greatest, mightiest Armed Forces probably ever put together, with overwhelming force and firepower not seen before and the technological advantage that was not even in doubt, we should never have been defeated on the battlefield, should we?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Of course, as you have observed, the military instrument is just one instrument in national statecraft. When we look at the lessons from Afghanistan, we will want to understand the extent to which we understood the local political dynamics and how you use the military instrument in that context. I would tell you from my own personal experience in southern Afghanistan for a year in 2009-10 that the way I achieved an effect was not about the military instrument. It was much more about what I would describe as armed politics. It was much more about understanding the local Afghan political dynamics in the districts around Kandahar and in Helmand. It was much more about having a conversation that gave the population the confidence that they would have appropriate Afghan district governors and district chiefs of police who would be able to connect them, therefore, to governance. It is much more about that than it is about malleting people.

Going back to the initial intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001, because the political objective was very much about removing bin Laden and al-Qaeda, what of course happened was that we partnered with some

pretty unsavoury characters, and we killed—I say "we"; I think it was more the United States at that stage—a number of people. Their families became the enemy and the whole thing became a very difficult political challenge to resolve, so it does not matter how effective one's military machinery is. If it is not being used in the right way in terms of the politics of the region and the country in which you are doing this, you will fail.

Q34 **Derek Twigg:** Okay, that is interesting. It leads me on to my next question very nicely. As you know, there has been criticism on both sides that the military were not honest enough with the politicians about what could be achieved and what resources they would need, and the politicians were not clear about the strategic direction and, for instance, how long they were prepared to carry on with the conflict. Do you have any thoughts on that?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, I think I have. First, let us put to one side the fact that military leaders have to be positive because they are leading people. Let us put that to one side. In terms of what the military told the political level, I think there were some profound questions to be asked about whether or not the military input was matched to the political objective in the most effective way. As history begins to be written about this, I think questions will be asked about that. There are some good books on this already. Eliot Cohen wrote a great book, "Supreme Command". There are definitely some questions to be put. Certainly the big lesson that I personally took away from my engagement in Afghanistan, in terms of becoming the CDS, was that I should be absolutely clinically honest, in terms of what I thought the military would be able to achieve, with my political leadership.

Q35 **Derek Twigg:** Could you give an example of where specifically that went wrong, or was it a general thing that failed?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, I think I have been fortunate. I think that in my three and a half years, the advice that I have given has been advice that is very honest and very clear about what you could achieve—

Q36 **Derek Twigg:** You said it wasn't always that way, if I understood you.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I am saying that if you look back over the 20 years of the Afghan campaign, I suspect that advice may have been given that was not as well thought through as it might have been. I am talking about Americans, Canadians, or whoever else it might be, in positions throughout the alliance at the time.

Q37 **Derek Twigg:** Other Members might want to pick up on that, because I am conscious of time. Can we go back to what you said in April? You believed that the Taliban had become more open-minded. Could you enlighten the Committee, tell us, what evidence you had for that and why you thought it, particularly in view of the fact that now there is an all-male Cabinet and of course we are not seeing much in terms of women's rights develop?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, certainly. The answer is that they are, sadly, a very exclusive Government. But equally, there are people in that

Government who come from the political commission, who of course were the people that the international community—in particular, Zal Khalilzad—were engaging with: people like Baradar. Of course, what that engagement was revealing was that they were more modern than their predecessors. I am not for a minute saying that—

Q38 **Mr Francois:** Oh, come on!

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** More modern than their predecessors—that is a perfectly respectable thing to say. The fact that they are—

Q39 **Mr Francois:** It is still an all-male Cabinet.

**Chair:** Mark, let Derek finish.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I am not arguing about that. I have just said that they are not an inclusive Government. I am absolutely saying that, and I am absolutely saying that their attitude towards women, and their attitude towards secondary education for women, is reprehensible. I am not denying that. What I am saying, though, is that they are different from what we had pre-2001. Members of your Committee have engaged with them as well, and you will know what I am talking about, but they are not where we want them to be.

Q40 **Derek Twigg:** You talked about your engagement. What did they say? What evidence was there that they were going to be more open-minded? You mentioned the political commission.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Part of what I have been doing as Chief of the Defence Staff is pursuing a parallel peace track to the one that Zal Khalilzad was pursuing. This was essentially about trying to build mutual trust between Afghanistan and Pakistan. That is because—

Q41 **Derek Twigg:** Sorry, a parallel track, you say?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** A parallel track. It was one that the system set up, and the Americans were keen for this to occur, because of course we have a close relationship with Pakistan and, indeed, I had very close relationships with Ashraf Ghani from when I was the deputy commander in ISAF in 2012 and 2013. The purpose of that peace track, as I said, was to try to build mutual trust and common understanding between the two countries. Of course, in doing that, one had a pretty good exposure to what all the parties thought about the Taliban at the time. Indeed, I made many trips to the region and had some very constructive conversations that actually led to, at the end of last year, Imran Khan visiting Kabul. That was the first time a Pakistani leader had ever visited Kabul. He signed off a shared vision with President Ashraf Ghani about what they wanted the region to look like and, in particular, what they wanted the relationship between the two countries to look like. Of course, as part of that process, one developed more of an understanding about what the political commission were seeking to do in Afghanistan. I am not for a minute suggesting that one was in a position to influence their thinking or, indeed, that one—

Q42 **Derek Twigg:** Sorry, is it the very top of the Taliban that we are talking about? You got that impression from the very top and not just from the commission?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, from the political commission.

**Derek Twigg:** Okay.

Q43 **Mr Francois:** General, I agree with you that our veterans have everything to be proud of. They fought valiantly, and any failings were not theirs.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Sorry, I missed that last bit.

**Mr Francois:** Any failings were not by our veterans. They fought valiantly. I suspect you and I would agree on that. I suspect we would also agree that we were not defeated on the battlefield; I think we would agree on that. We have heard reference to Sun Tzu, so let's switch to Clausewitz. Clausewitz teaches us that the application of military force must be for a political objective. You don't go malleting people for the sake of it; there has to be some political point to the end of it. So even if militarily we never lost on the battlefield, politically we were defeated, weren't we? We did lose, didn't we?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I said to you—this is as far as I will go on this—that it was not the outcome that I as a military officer hoped for. The questions you are asking are very political questions, and as a military officer I do not think it is for me to judge the politics in all of this.

Q44 **Mr Francois:** But, in a way, you have. You said that you hope in a few years' time the whole place will be better than it is now. That is a political assertion, isn't it?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I don't know. I think that is a personal assertion.

Q45 **Mr Francois:** Okay. When Ben Wallace, the Defence Secretary, gave evidence to the Committee recently, the essence of his testimony—I am paraphrasing, not quoting him—was that the intelligence apparatus had anticipated that the Government of Afghanistan might collapse, but the difference was in the actual pace of events. Again, the essence of his testimony was that, by July, he had realised that the game was up. He then began to plan accordingly and, as we know, he tried to assemble a coalition of the willing. That was in July.

On 18 August, you told Sky News—this is a quote—that "You have to be very careful using the word enemy. People need to understand who the Taliban actually are. They are a disparate collection of tribespeople…They are country boys and the plain fact is they happen to live by a code of honour which has been their standard for many years." How is it that the most successful military alliance in the history of the world was run out of town by a collection of country boys, General?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Just to put a couple of things straight on that quote, I was quoting from President Karzai, in fact, which I said in the interview. Secondly, I suspect people would probably be quite surprised

with me saying that they are not the enemy. The reason I said that was because I had 1,000 troops on the ground and we were trying to evacuate what turned out to be 15,000 Afghans. At that particular point in time, I was not exactly going to call out the people who could quite easily have made my life very uncomfortable on the ground.

Putting that to one side, I think it comes back to what I was describing in answer to Derek Twigg's question. It is about how you appreciate the local politics on the ground. I firmly believe that lessons will be learned about how you use the military instrument and how you build the capacity of indigenous forces. How do you build sustainable indigenous forces? These are really important questions that we all need to learn if we are to get involved in this sort of intervention in future.

Q46 **Mr Francois:** General, I will meet you halfway. We built sustainable forces. The Afghan army were relatively capable, but we took away their key enablers. Once we took away their fast air and we did not give them enough ammunition—and they weren't paid properly by a corrupt Government, which was not our fault—it is not entirely surprising that they collapsed, is it?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, and I have just said exactly that myself. My point about sustainability is less about that; it is much more about institutional sustainability. So much of their logistics system was provided by a backbone of NATO people, which became NATO contractors. It was much deeper than even what you just said implies. It was actually about culture.

There was an insistence on multi-ethnic units. Actually that is a very laudable thing to do—I remember the first Afghan national army battalion passing out in 2002, and it was very commendable that it was a mix of Hazaras, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and the like—but, as you know very well from your own regimental experience, it is about human bonding, and if you cannot achieve that, the moral component will suffer. I think there are some quite big questions to ask about the purity of some of these thoughts and ideas and whether they were imposed on people. My point really is a more profound one about the institutional sustainability of the system.

Q47 **Mr Francois:** Just to be clear, the "country boys" quote was you quoting President Karzai.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Absolutely.

Q48 **Mr Francois:** Do you now decry that quote?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No I don't, because he was trying to bring to life the nature of the individuals concerned, and what he was saying was that, of course, they come out of the country, just as—let's face it—a lot of the people who won in Vietnam came out of the country as well. He was trying to describe it as not being part of the urban bit of Afghanistan. There are two Afghanistans: one that is urban and one that is fundamentally rural and therefore rather different. He was trying to bring

that to life, and I wanted to use that. Perhaps it was ill-advised to do it on Sky TV—it might have been better to have done it in the way in which we are talking now—but, anyway, I was trying to bring to life, for people's purpose, what they are like. You will remember that Pashtunwali code from when you were Minister for the Armed Forces all those years ago, and that was something that we lived with on a daily basis.

Q49 **Mr Francois:** General, I accept that you have a role as the professional head of the Armed Forces to seek to maintain morale. I think the whole Committee understands that. It is also better if we accept the truth, which is that we lost. Winston Churchill once said that the first stage in addressing any problem, no matter how complex, is to admit that the problem exists. If I may say so, there is a slightly Kafkaesque post-facto rationalisation going on. Ask two men in a pub what happened in Afghanistan, and they will say that we were run out of town by the Taliban. We were, weren't we?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The answer is that we had to leave by 31 August because that was the deal that the Americans struck with the Taliban.

Q50 **Mr Francois:** Yes, but Ben saw that coming in July and tried to do something about it.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Either way, we were leaving by 31 August.

Q51 **Mr Francois:** Just to be clear, because we want to understand you, is your rationale for saying what you said on 18 August that we still had people on the ground and that therefore we had to use careful language so as not to make it worse?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, in terms of Pitting, at that time, we needed to use careful language. To your point, on 29 February last year, the Americans signed a deal with the Taliban, which said that we were leaving by 1 May. That subsequently got extended until 31 August. Whichever way we looked at it, we were leaving by 31 August. There are questions to ask about the efficacy of that deal, with other things associated with it. A whole load of opprobrium has been meted out on President Biden for making that decision, but the bottom line is that we did not have a choice in that. As Ben Wallace said in his testimony to you, I think—he has been completely consistent about this—

**Mr Francois:** Yes, he has.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The fact of the matter is that we knew that we had to go by 31 August. We were not going to stay.

**Mr Francois:** Okay, one last one. You cannot have it both ways. You said that, five years from now, Afghanistan could be a much better place. By then, with all respect, Sir, you will have retired and written your book and all the other things that your predecessors do. Do you really stand by that? Do you think that, if we look back in 2026, Afghanistan will be a much better place than it is in 2021?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Would you go on holiday to Vietnam?

Q52 **Mr Francois:** Would I go on holiday to Vietnam now?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes.

**Mr Francois:** I am only just about allowed to go on holiday to the United States, Sir, so I think I will go to Las Vegas first before I go to Saigon.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Okay, but would you go on holiday to Vietnam?

**Mr Francois:** I am not sure that I would.

Q53 **Chair:** I think the point you are making is that, after the Vietnam war, Vietnam is somewhere that you could go to. With Afghanistan, if I can just pick this thread up, the trouble is that the music has not stopped. You could see a Kurdistanesque enclave developing north of the Hindu Kush. The Uzbeks and Tajiks have never been run by the Pashtuns. The concern that we have is to where this then goes. May I ask a more provocative question? Do you see British or NATO forces ever returning to Afghanistan?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I think it depends on how well the Taliban do at governing the place. There are weak signals that that will be quite a challenge. We already know about the humanitarian crisis, which is now all over the media, and that is very worrying. We already know that ISIS-KP is becoming more of a thing. We do not yet see any true indications that international terrorism, or terrorism that would like to have an international effect, is alive and well there. The plain fact is that a lot of it will depend on whether that country can be stabilised.

Q54 **Chair:** I think we have concluded this. My final concern is the scale of understanding that we had of the country itself. Do you agree, that, if you want to understand the Taliban, you need to understand the Mujahideen? If you want to understand the Mujahideen, you need to understand the Soviet invasion. And if you want to understand the Soviet invasion, you then need to understand the American foreign policy that was actually challenging that Soviet invasion.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I would go even further than that. You need to understand the anthropology of the Durrani tribal system. You need to understand the competing dynamics with the different ethnicities, whether that is Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Turkmen and so on and so forth. You need to understand what is going on in Pakistan. You need to understand the Iranian dynamic. You need to understand the Chinese dynamic. You need to understand all of these extraordinary factors which have a bearing on the stability of that country.

Q55 **Chair:** I would agree with all of that, as would this Committee. I make the point, which I hope you will agree, that one thing we bring to the special relationship is understanding the world around us, the depth of insight that we have because of our reach, our connectivity and our history. What was missing in Afghanistan was all the detail that you have just spoken about, to tell those people who are making the political

judgments where things could actually go. We have failed. We have had an American general sitting exactly where you are—actually, I think it was on Zoom; forgive me—and he admitted that he did not know the difference between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites before he went to Iraq; he did not know the difference between the Durranis and the Ghilzais before he went to Afghanistan. Yet the military was fully responsible not just for the warfighting, but for the peacekeeping and stabilisation. We need to learn better from that for the very reasons that we are calling for an inquiry: we may be doing it in Mali; we may be doing it in Yemen; we may be doing it somewhere else—perhaps even back in Afghanistan. Would you agree?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I absolutely agree that none of us—I do not think we can claim any advantage over the United States on this—had adequate insight and understanding of the nature of the challenge in Afghanistan before we got involved in it.

**Chair:** Okay, let us draw a line under that. We have a very small question from Richard—I am conscious of time.

Q56 **Richard Drax:** It is a very small one. The question about ever going back into Afghanistan has already been asked several times, but do you think that were a threat to emerge from there now, we could deal with it very capably—with our technology, our special forces and so on—without having to put boots back on the ground in a country like that?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I think the jury is probably out. We all know that counter-terrorism is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. It is generally easier to do counter-terrorism if you have a presence on the ground and a relationship with the local forces to be able to achieve it. Of course, none of those things will be in place at the moment, so the answer is that it would be challenging, and we will have to see how things evolve.

Q57 **Chair:** Thank you for that. Let us move to the carrier strike group and the integrated operating concept, which I think are tied together—that is very much something that you have been pushing during your tenure as CDS. In just a few sentences, could you speak about the success of the tasking that the carrier strike group is returning from?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** She has a bit more work to do: she is stopping in Egypt and then there is some work to do off the Italian coast and in the Mediterranean before she comes back to the UK by December. The answer is that I think we have learned a great deal. When you consider that the group was able to visit 40 different countries—there will be more in the meantime, of course—despite covid, the effect that she achieved was impressive, particularly the effect that she achieved through what I would describe as a quintessentially British way of exercising command and control, which is that, unlike other nations' carrier groups, we believe in allowing our escorts to be very distributed in terms of the way they achieve their effect, whereas other carriers groups tend to keep their escorts very close at heel. That means that you can have a presence that perhaps covers significant distances—maybe as much as 1,500 nautical

miles—which is very different from the way others do business. We are very impressed with what it has achieved in terms of soft power.

Of course, what we are also testing is how we can achieve what we call multi-domain integration. I am sorry; that is a ghastly professional military term that I will try to bring to life in simple terms. Think of your iPhone in terms of its technology; you are able, without necessarily knowing, to connect your iPhone into a much broader cloud and a much broader set of networks for communication purposes and receiving information. You are also able, because it has what we call open-systems architecture, to receive instant upgrades to the applications you have on your phone, and that means that it stays relevant in technological terms despite you having perhaps bought it two or three years ago.

What we are trying to do in the military is achieve the same effect, because we want to be able to have a cloud, or a digital backbone that all our sensors—our ISR systems, but also our effectors, as in fires, whether delivered from space, the third dimension, land or maritime—as well as all the people who have to make decisions, can be plugged into. With the carrier group, we were testing the proposition that if you bring space, cyber, maritime and air together—and land from time to time—and you integrate them effectively, you can have extraordinarily good, fused situation awareness, meaning that your understanding of the circumstances around you becomes much better than it might be in the way that we traditionally did business.

We are testing that, and experimentation will have to be at the heart of what we are talking about here, because although we all understand that information technology is likely to be the turnkey capability for the 2030s, we do not know what the best combination of information technologies will be to give us that edge. Experimentation has become as important as it was in the 1930s. Something that we wanted to get out of the carrier deployment was to test some of these ideas and see whether or not these are the sorts of developments that we need to be pushing more broadly into defence as a whole.

I think we learned from it that we are making progress, but it is challenging. It is challenging because, like everything else in the world, data is at the heart of this. I am afraid that, from our perspective, data does tend to be contained in stovepipes. We are not particularly effective at bringing it across the stovepipes and being able to use it to achieve the sort of advantage that I have been talking about, and we have work to do to achieve that. That is about people as much as technology, because it is about valuing data engineers and data scientists in the same way that we value marksmen in an infantry company.

Q58 **Chair:** Thank you for that. Can you just explain whether this is a UK capability, or how does this dovetail in with our closest allies, particularly the United States, and more widely a coalition force, which would likely be the vehicle we would be participating in when dealing with a wider threat?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, this is very much at the heart of what NATO is trying to do in terms of its modernisation as well. Indeed, SACEUR is keen to host a gathering, a seminar, in this country next year, in which we would see some of this stuff being developed in a broader NATO sense. I feel this very strongly having commanded a NATO division in southern Afghanistan of some 60,000 to 70,000 troops where, when I first took it over, we needed seven different means of communication to talk to the seven different taskforces.

Within three to four months, we were fortunate to have something called the Afghan mission network, which made it possible for all those seven taskforces to integrate, to share common information and common situational awareness, to receive orders directly from the centre, but also to be able to bring in the other domains, particularly the third dimension in terms of ISR, but also cyber and space. The answer is that it is not just us doing this; it needs to be done in a NATO, and therefore multinational, context. Of course, it is important that it can work with the United States as well.

Q59 **Chair:** This is all very welcome. It shows that we are at the sharp edge of our defence posture on having kinetic capability to match peer-on-peer. The concern that has been expressed as we have had the discussions is whether we are going to be doing these high-risk, low-probability events or whether we are going to be tasking our Armed Forces with more mundane things. While there is the increasing threat of concern from both Russia and China—which is why we went through the South China sea to show presence—there is actually an awful lot of activity happening on a very low level, where greater upstream engagement and greater force presence will reap dividends.

I am concerned that we are becoming a very niche, bespoke Armed Forces, in particular in the maritime domain. I have used this analogy before: we have the pieces at the back of the chessboard, but not many of the pawns. There is arguably a soft power cold war taking place, where China is slowly and gradually nudging us out of favoured nation status using its leverage of One Belt One Road, technology and economic powers to replace us in Commonwealth countries. We are losing sight of how hard power, soft power, economic prosperities and connectivities should work together to help keep the peace, rather than us sliding towards the world splintering perhaps into two spheres of competing influence.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** If you go back to my opening remarks, when I talked about this little booklet—which is now a pamphlet—I said that it was about utilising all of the instruments of national power, but particularly also about utilising soft power with hard power to achieve an outcome. One of the reasons why I have a group of Caribbean Chiefs of Defence who get together on an annual basis is because the thing they most want, in terms of developing their capability and training their individuals, is Sandhurst and the Royal Naval College. Indeed, if you look at many of the leaders in the Caribbean, some were educated at Sandhurst or Dartmouth.

The reality is that we absolutely understand the value of soft power and the brands that we have, whether the defence academy or any of the three single service colleges that we have. We use that to significant effect. If you go to the Middle East, it is the case that only a year and a half ago, three of the leaders in the GCC were educated at Sandhurst.

We also recognise that so much of this is about great power competition. One of the reasons why it is important to have this gathering of Caribbean chiefs of defence is because if you go to Antigua you will find one of the largest Chinese embassies in the world. You will also find that many of those Caribbean chiefs of defence are invited to Beijing to partake in the sorts of things that China offers. We understand the vital importance of our being connected to those countries who are more naturally wanting to be our ally and friend rather than our client. That is the case in Africa, the Middle East and the Caribbean, and it is probably the case in South America.

Q60 **Chair:** Do you feel that the MoD is doing enough with the FCDO and other Departments to create the grand strategies that we need, to do exactly what you are talking about? Or do you think there is work to be done there?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I think it is a work in progress. In my opening remarks, I said that one of the challenges for my successor is how we create the strategic culture, posture and way of operating that is fit for purpose in this era of global competition. That is not just in the Ministry of Defence; it is across Whitehall. What is necessary in the NSS is that we are also able to execute grand strategy in a much more competitive world than the one we have grown up in.

Q61 **Richard Drax:** How will the digital backbone work with other networks such as the RN naval strike network or the NATO federated mission network?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** First of all, it is about making sure you have what we call open data standards. It sounds awfully geeky, but it means things can talk to each other because they share the same data. As I said a moment ago, the reality is that we are not very good at that; it tends to be two stovepipes, which is why last year we appointed a chief data officer. One of her most important tasks is to make sure that we have a proper approach to common data standards, so we can all share the data in an effective way. On top of that, we also need to make sure that we have a common approach to the security of data. After our people, I would argue that our data is probably the most precious thing we have. I do not think our culture is necessarily as protective and as assuring of it as it should be. She has work to do on that score as well.

The other part of it is trying to ensure that the programmes that the domains have, like you described in the Navy—there is a similar programme in the Army or the Air Force—not only enable the network connection, in other words can talk to each other, but have an open

architecture so you can genuinely evolve them collectively across defence. That is what the digital backbone is about.

The other exciting innovation that was announced in the integrated review and is being given meaning at the moment is the Digital Foundry. Once it is up and running, the Digital Foundry will provide the expertise and port of call that you would go to if you were trying to make all this stuff come together in an effective fashion. It will provide the way that you will bring together the data engineer necessary to make sure that the Navy's programme is linked to the way in which you want it to interface with the broader strategic commands' approach to this. It is a work in progress but there is absolute clarity on the nature of the challenge—to your point about recognising the challenge at the beginning. In so doing, we understand that this a very high priority. That is what the multi-domain integration change programme is about, which sits under strategic command.

Q62 **Richard Drax:** We have just come back from the US, where we learned a lot about IT, AI and all the other things that are coming. It is really frightening what the potential of all this is, particularly from the enemy's perspective. What sort of level, from one to 10—10 being good—do you see our Armed Forces are at for meeting this digital challenge?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The problem is that the challenge is ever evolving, as is the technology. If I was being realistic, I would say perhaps 3, gusting 4. We have a long way to go. We are probably better off in many ways than the Americans, because they tend to do everything through their services and tend to be, in many ways—they would admit this—more stove pipe than we are. Being smaller, we are completely obliged to make it work across the five domains of space, cyber, land, air and maritime. It is much harder for them to do that.

Q63 **Richard Drax:** We are linking in with the US, and obviously NATO is important—

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes. We briefed on JADC2, which is their joint command and control thing. That is something that we are working closely with them to do, but to the Chair's perspective, this cannot just be us and the Americans; it has to be NATO as well.

Q64 **Richard Drax:** Has the senior responsible officer—the one that you are talking about—been appointed to manage all this?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, there is a programme under Lieutenant General Rob Magowan, who is responsible for the change programme. He is not responsible for the whole thing, because it is very complex what we are talking about. The chief information officer, Charlie Forte, who is a civilian, sits over the top of the digital backbone and everything associated with that.

Q65 **Richard Drax:** So there is a lot more work to do.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, Richard, a lot of work to do. It is work that is continually evolving, which is interesting.

**Chair:** Let us move on to personnel.

Q66 **Mr Francois:** And procurement, Chairman. General, if the role of the Armed Forces is to deter war and, should deterrence fail, to fight and then to win, would you agree that they need the best possible equipment to do that?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** That is certainly part of it, yes, but we measure capability beyond just equipment. We also think about our relationship with allies and everything associated with that. What we are discovering is that modern deterrence, given what I was describing about this constant competition that is going on at the moment against the sort of rivals we are up against, requires some careful thought as to how you are achieving the deterrence effect.

Q67 **Mr Francois:** Earlier this year, in March I think, the Defence Committee produced a report called "Obsolescent and outgunned: the British Army's armoured vehicle capability". I will read you the key sentence from the summary: "This report reveals a woeful story of bureaucratic procrastination, military indecision, financial mismanagement and general ineptitude, which have continually bedevilled attempts to properly re-equip the British Army over the last two decades." As part of this report, we said there were serious problems with Ajax. The Ministry of Defence told us that we did not know what we were talking about. Where are we on Ajax now?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The answer is that there was a written ministerial statement made on it, I think around 18 October. That refers to the really important deep dives being conducted at the moment to get after some of the challenges you describe, not least the challenge they have with vibration and the challenge they have with noise. The other part of all that is ensuring for the workforce, who have been trialling Ajax, that their hearing loss and everything associated with that is being properly attended to.

Q68 **Mr Francois:** Does that include those who have already been discharged from the Armed Forces because their hearing was damaged in the trials?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, it does. There were five individuals who have been discharged from the Army. Around 330 have been involved in the trial.

Q69 **Mr Francois:** As a professional military officer, would you want to go to war in a tank that makes you deaf?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I think I already have done.

Q70 **Mr Francois:** You can't be, sir, because you can hear me now.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, on a good day, but as you have said, I have often asked you during the course of this conversation to repeat what you were saying. Having been brought up in the FV432 and, bless it, the Warrior, as both a commanding officer and a brigade commander, I

very well know that the quality of hearing protection that I received was perhaps not as great as it could be.

Q71 **Mr Francois:** You are not saying that the hearing problems associated with Ajax are exaggerated.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The answer is that I think we need to wait until the health and safety report is published, which I think is going to be by the end of November, and I think that should get after your question.

Q72 **Chair:** Can I just ask quickly—this is really interesting—about the FV432? Would that fail modern testing? Would that not be allowed to move forward?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** If you look at the works under way at the moment—the health and safety report will get after this—there are question marks about all armoured vehicles, and they all need to be checked to ensure that they are not doing the sorts of damage that Mark refers to.

Q73 **Mr Francois:** We understand that there are now issues about headsets and that people in other vehicles—thousands of soldiers, without exaggerating—may now have to have hearing tests.

Let us move to the Public Accounts Committee, which last week produced the report "Improving the performance of major defence equipment contracts". Under "Conclusions and recommendations", the first is: "The Department's system for delivering major equipment capabilities is broken and is repeatedly wasting taxpayers' money." It then goes through a litany of programmes that have gone horribly wrong. Incidentally, it described Ajax as a "catastrophe". Do you accept that the procurement system of the Ministry of Defence is broken, General?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I have to be quite careful here, because of course, as you will remember from when you were Minister for Defence People and Veterans and then Minister for the Armed Forces, the role of the CDS is not fundamentally about the acquisition process; that's not in my portfolio. What I of course do is argue strongly for the right capabilities for the Army, and then other parts of the Department are responsible for making sure that it is acquired effectively.

What I would observe, which I think is to your point, is that given the extraordinary pace of technological change there have to be questions asked—regardless of how clever you are with open-system architectures—about whether the system of defining a requirement, specifying it up the ying-yang and then throwing it over the fence for a competition, when the answer that comes back will invariably be "Best value for money" and has probably taken out any incentivisation for your supplier to innovate, is a model that could work, given the technology evolution we are under at the moment. So it is definitely the case that we will have to think very profoundly about how we deal with stuff we are acquiring that will have technology at the heart of it.

Q74 **Mr Francois:** Right—we are going to have to do some profound thinking.

The Infrastructure and Projects Authority, which is the Government's auditor as opposed to the National Audit Office, which is Parliament's auditor, each year audits all the major infrastructure programmes in Government, from HS2 downwards, producing an annual report and grading projects on a traffic-light system. It looked at the 36 major programmes in the Ministry of Defence, from Dreadnought south— Ajax, by example, was graded red, meaning basically, "You're not going to get there." A green rating means a programme is on time and on cost. I realise you are not responsible for procurement, but you are the head of the Armed Forces; your people use this kit. If they have to go to war, they have to fight with it. Of the 36, how many do you think were green?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The bottom line is that I suspect not more than half a dozen.

Q75 **Mr Francois:** Half a dozen?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes.

Q76 **Mr Francois:** None. Not one. Not one single major procurement programme—we are talking about over £150 billion of the programmes that were audited—is on time and on cost. Is that acceptable?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** As I said to you earlier, I am not responsible for the procurement system or indeed for managing these programmes—

Q77 **Mr Francois:** You are or you aren't, because—

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I'm not. I'm not responsible.

Q78 **Mr Francois:** No, you are. I'll tell you why you are—because if people have to go to war, they have to use that kit. So you are responsible, if not directly then indirectly. You're the professional head of the Armed Forces, and the all-party Public Accounts Committee has said that the method for buying that kit is "broken", and if people have to fight they fight with that kit, whether it works or not. So, with respect, you are responsible.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** What I'm responsible for is the capability of the Armed Forces.

**Mr Francois:** Right.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I'm very clear about that.

Q79 **Mr Francois:** Okay. And the PAC says that the system for buying it is broken.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Roger out.

Q80 **Mr Francois:** Okay, roger out. So you agree it's broken?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** As I said to you, I think it is not likely to be able to deal with the rapid pace of technological change and the way that we set requirements at the moment.

Q81 **Mr Francois:** Okay. You see, it's been broken for years, hasn't it? So, here's the summary of the PAC's verdict. The NAO spent a year scrubbing this, or just about. Here's what the PAC concluded: "To meet the aspirations of the Integrated Review"—which you have referred to on multiple occasions—"the Department's broken system for acquiring military equipment needs an urgent rethink, led by HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office." The gist of this report is that the system is so broken you can't trust the MoD to fix it. Do you agree that we should now bring in the Cabinet Office and the Treasury—in other words, some grown-ups—to fix the MoD's disastrous record of wasting billions of taxpayers' money on kit that doesn't work?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, I don't. I think that, actually, some of the people involved in this are experts at what they do.

Q82 **Mr Francois:** Are you joking?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, I do think some of the people—

Q83 **Mr Francois:** A total of 36 projects and not one green? Are they experts? What do bad people look like?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I do think that if you see the way that DE&S has transformed itself under the leadership of Simon Bollom over the course of the last couple of years, you would be surprised how effective it is. I would strongly recommend that you go and visit it and find out what it's like.

Q84 **Mr Francois:** Don't worry—he has appeared before this Committee. We know him very well indeed.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, but I would go broader than that. I would—

Q85 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, just to be clear, because this is important: 36 programmes, none of them green, and you're saying that's a transformation?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, I'm not. What I am saying is that you would be surprised how the DE&S has transformed itself. I am not saying that it is perfect yet, and I am not for a minute saying that it is acceptable that any—

Q86 **Mr Francois:** It is not perfect—it is broken.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** May I finish, please? I am not accepting of anything that those reports say—of course I am not. However, it is not necessarily within my gift to fix them. All I can do is bang on about the importance of making sure that our Armed Forces are equipped appropriately with the capabilities they need to meet the threats of today. That is my job, and that is what I spend a great deal of time advocating and arguing for.

Q87 **Mr Francois:** With respect, sir, you have mentioned the managing defence programme, which is something that came—

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Modernising Defence Programme.

**Mr Francois:** Yes, that's right. The key task of that was to balance the equipment plan. It was a failure, wasn't it? Even today, the equipment plan is not in balance. It is all in here. That failed, didn't it?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** It was overtaken by our input to the spending review in November last year, when we got a multi-year settlement, which was very different from what we had from the Modernising Defence Programme, which was one year at a time. That allowed the defence programme to be significantly more balanced than it has ever been in my career. That means that we can genuinely do forward planning and that we have a better chance of making sure that the capabilities that the Armed Forces need for the 2030s are likely to be delivered in service.

Q88 **Mr Francois:** It is still not balanced now. We keep being told that the equipment plan is just about to be published, but it never quite is, so we cannot say whether it is out of kilter now, because the MoD never get round to publishing it. But we know the last one is out of balance, and we know it has been out of balance for years. Empirically, we know that, don't we?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I can assure you that when the equipment programme is published, which it will be at some stage in the next two months, you will be pleased to see that the thing is rather more in balance than you or I will ever remember.

**Chair:** We will have to wait for that.

Q89 **Mr Francois:** Lastly, sir, within a year or so of your leaving, do you think we will have one or two that are green?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The answer is that I don't know. The plain fact is that those who are responsible for managing our programmes—I am confident—will realise that they need to get to where they need to get to.

Q90 **Mr Francois:** You are responsible; you are the head of the Armed Forces. You cannot shirk this.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, I'm sorry—I am not responsible for procurement. What I am responsible for is making sure the Armed Forces have the right capabilities.

**Chair:** We are now going round in circles making these points.

Q91 **Mr Francois:** They don't.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** That is something I argue about and argue for repeatedly, and it is one of the reasons why we got an uplift in funding last November.

Q92 **Mr Francois:** Yes, to fill in all the gaps with all the money that we wasted—like Ajax, which is £4 billion. That is a quarter of the uplift in one programme, isn't it?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** There is also a great deal of new capability.

**Chair:** We need to move on. The points have been made.

Q93 **Richard Drax:** One tiny point, General. In my constituency, the new battle lab, which I am sure you are aware of, is a way forward. What they are planning to do is get small enterprise and innovators to look at kit. Rather than giving it to the big boys to do something, which is potentially a disaster, they will ask innovators to come up with something—to either modernise existing kit, or a new bit of a kit—and then work that way. They will test it and bring it out, and then give it to the big boys to produce. That is what they are trying to do. Is that not a sensible way forward?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I think the more that one can bring small and medium-sized enterprises into an enterprise approach, the better you can do.

Q94 **Richard Drax:** They are so quick and versatile.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, but it does require—back to Mr Francois's intervention—having a slightly different approach to acquisition in order to be able to bring forth the goods and potential of these things.

Q95 **Chair:** The last part of this section is to do with personnel and the reduction of 10,000 troops. I suspect it is because you are moving into cyber and space—that is understood—but it is to the detriment of the three conventional services. One of the hits has been Hercules, which I mentioned, but we have also seen ships, tanks and personnel. Ten thousand troops is a huge amount. Covid was an illustration of how we need to utilise people, as was Operating Pitting. You cannot stabilise or provide humanitarian aid with drones and AI, yet the argument being made is that this is where the Armed Forces need to go. Do you recognise that this is a great example of where, if you made the case to the British people, they would actually say, "This is the wrong call," and that we need to provide funds to make sure we have the Armed Forces that we require?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, but I would also say that we need to invest properly in our reserve. The reserve is there to provide the sort of resilience that we saw was necessary during covid. The piece of work that was done by Mark Lancaster, the "Reserve Forces Review 2030", which I don't think there has yet been a formal response to, is a very good example of where you can achieve much greater effect from your connection to the population. A combination of bringing together different types of human beings on different terms and conditions of service is probably the right way for us to go.

Q96 **Chair:** Tapping into civvy skillsets, would you say, as well?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** That too, certainly. We saw that very vividly during covid, where some of the logistic challenges were solved by people who had come in from the reserve.

**Chair:** I am conscious of time and we need to make progress. Can we turn to veterans now, please?

Q97 **Stuart Anderson:** General, are you happy with the way veterans are treated in the UK?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I think it is patchy; it varies between parts of the country, different parts of society and so forth. I am never completely comfortable. I am patron of a charity supporting wounded veterans. Increasingly, we see more examples of post-traumatic stress disorder, which, of course, is likely to occur several years after the event. The answer is that we can always do better by our veterans. Fundamentally, I feel passionately that we should try to do that.

Q98 **Stuart Anderson:** Give me some examples of where can do better.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The Office for Veterans' Affairs is a great starting point, and that is achieving an effect. I've talked to a few of the veterans looked after by that charity, and these are their ideas, not ones that the Department is pushing or running with at the moment. There are some areas, such as placing pressure on local councils to give servicemen and women who are veterans a better chance at housing and education.

Q99 **Chair:** Enforcing the Armed Forces covenant.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, that is an Armed Forces covenant thing, but seeing more pressure applied to do that. Some of the relationships across Government are an area where the OVA will be very effective. For example, getting the Department for Work and Pensions to be helpful in the way it shows what benefits and how a veteran's pension might bear on some of those benefits. That would be helpful, as would having a sub-department that focuses on wounded and sick people.

Q100 **Stuart Anderson:** A sub-department within the OVA?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes, something on those lines, they would think is a good idea. There is something probably about having an institution that holds Veterans UK to account for how veterans are treated. That might be an effective thing to do.

There are areas where we can do better. Of course, our system is different from the American one, as you will have discovered when you were over there, where the Department of Defence is responsible from cradle to grave. Given that we have a national health service, which the US does not have, we don't do it like that.

I think it is about how you bring veterans' challenges properly to the fore so that you are better able to provide help where it is needed. That is what we need to be doing. One of the great things about the week we are now in—Remembrance Week—is that we bring veterans' affairs much more on to the front burner. It is that sense of having a focus on them that we need to keep making society understand.

Q101 **Stuart Anderson:** You raise an interesting point about how the Department of Defence does it in the US. At the moment, veterans' medical, mental and physical needs are sorted out by the NHS. Why do we do it that way? Would it be better to do something like the American

model? Would the veterans get the service they need? Or do we leave it to the NHS?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I think it is about joining the dots properly with the NHS. One thing that will be very helpful, which I think will be fielded within the next two to three years, is something called Programme Cortisone. It will link the medical records of all service people to the NHS digital system. Of course, the great advantage when that happens is that you will be able to take it on as a veteran and your whole medical history will be properly understood.

Currently, there is a moment when you have had it in the Defence Medical Services and then you have to go through the process, as it were, of reloading it on to an NHS system. I think you will end up with cradle to grave data and cradle to grave medical histories, which will be a great starter and will help all sorts of people. How you do it retrospectively, I don't know, and that might be a bit of a challenge. Certainly, for those leaving the service over the next two to three years, Cortisone will make that possible.

Then there is a really interesting question about whether you are able to create hospital trusts or parts of the NHS—I don't know—that could perhaps be more focused on understanding veterans' challenges, which could therefore make the veteran experience easier when they are seeking help. That might be a way of looking at it. Indeed, there are some networks within the NHS that are trying to do that, which have sort of bottom-grown. There was one that I was seeing only about 10 days ago, which has been created by a surgeon who is an Army reservist who served in Afghanistan. He has sought to try to create a network of disciplines, which means that when one or other of them sees a veteran who needs particular care, the network is better able to help them achieve the effect.

Q102 **Stuart Anderson:** You have raised some very good points. I believe that that requires a strong Office for Veterans' Affairs—not just a strong OVA but support from the top for the OVA. Do you believe that in its current guise the OVA is capable of doing that? Does it have the correct political support, from what you have witnessed in the few years it has been running?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The answer is that I am not sure. I think it is very effective in working across Departments—I think it does that very well—but I don't know and it would be unfair for me to judge it.

Q103 **Richard Drax:** I want simply to make the point that there is an ex-soldier in Weymouth called Andy Price who has set up this charity and he has struggled for money. He has attracted a huge flock of former soldiers, sailors and Air Force men and women who need help. The question really is: does the NHS deal with this all or should the military use funds, given that we send men and women into battle, so we are responsible for them after the battle, in addition to when they are in the battle? Or should we rely on charities such as Andy's to help these men and women? Is there a balance of the two? Should it be one or the other? There are some holes

in the system, which I am sure you are aware of.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I think the important thing is to have a system that means that people do not fall through the cracks as you imply. I think there is a mix of charities and the NHS that we have at the moment, which can be made to work, but there is a challenge with charities. There are over 400 different service charities and they are not necessarily as coherent as they could be.

Q104 **Chair:** Isn't that where Cobseo—the Confederation of Service Charities—comes in to try to bring this together and the veterans' gateway service? Isn't that something we should be pushing?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** It does, but charities are often created for very personal reasons, and all of these people do not necessarily want to merge their charities together, which is understandable. I think the trick is how you maximise the potential of the whole system, but do it in a way that is open-minded and recognises that there will be different players in all of this game.

Q105 **Chair:** Just a final point on this one before we go to Northern Ireland veterans, which is: can you explain where the veterans' ID card is? I still get emails, having been a veterans Minister—my name is still on a website in the MoD, so perhaps we can fix that—from people asking, "When is this going to be available?". That is why I know that this is still alive—

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The answer is: I don't know. I am happy to come back to you with the answer.

**Chair:** Please do. Perhaps Leo Docherty could. Perhaps we could prompt the Minister to update us. Let us turn to Northern Ireland now.

Q106 **Mr Francois:** General, this is something for which you are most definitely not responsible but on which you may well have a view. The MoD led on a Bill—what became the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021—to prevent repeated investigation and reinvestigation against Afghan and Iraq veterans. From memory, I think you welcomed that legislation, which is now on the statute book.

With regard to Northern Ireland, it is not the MoD that leads on that legislation, but the Northern Ireland Office, so you are not responsible. However, we have had four years of waiting and two general elections. It is the politicians who have failed on this, not the military—let me be absolutely clear on that. This is a mea culpa, as a politician. We have had a hand-signed promise from the Prime Minister in July 2019 when he was running to be leader of the Conservative party that we would legislate to sort this out. Four years later, we still have not got the legislation. We have been promised it by Christmas—let's see. Assuming that we do get it, what do you think are the key components it should contain?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Again, as you well know, so much of this is politics. Clearly, what I would like to see as a military officer, and one who

has done a lot of tours in Northern Ireland, is that we do not find our people being treated shabbily.

Q107 **Mr Francois:** In all seriousness, I am asking you this partly wearing your morale hat, as it were, because we know how important this issue is. You could argue that if we do not solve this issue, it will deter people from joining the Armed Forces in the future. I am not going to ask you to comment on any one solution versus another, but I would like your opinion as CDS and to know how important you think it is that we get this legislation on the statute book. I think it is fair to ask you to comment on that, isn't it?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** What I think is fundamentally important is that we as a nation value those who have served that nation. That is the effect that we need to try to achieve. I think it was the Byzantine emperor Maurice who said that the nation that forgets its defenders will itself be forgotten. As a serving military officer, that would be my view on this.

**Mr Francois:** I know you are a classicist, Sir, and you have given a good example, so I shall leave it there.

**Chair:** Thank you very much, General. This is an important issue that we are dealing with and I know that Richard wants to come in.

Q108 **Richard Drax:** General, as I am sure you are aware, what will be proposed, as I understand it, is some form of amnesty, so it will therefore apply to the terrorists as it will to our soldiers. That is not going to please every one of the victims, as I understand it from people like Johnny Mercer who are not happy with this idea. Would you accept that an amnesty might be the only way forward? We fear that natural justice, which we would all like to take place, will lead to more soldiers being investigated. Is that the solution to ending this issue once and for all, or would it not satisfy you?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** The straight answer to that is that I am not sure. One is sufficiently well-informed to know that if you are going to end conflict, compromises have to be made; the question is what that compromise looks like. One recognises that. One also recognises, because one has to, that if any of our people on whatever battlefield it may be have done something that is outwith the laws of war or, for that matter, our values and standards, it is probably right and proper that they are brought to book over that.

In this particular issue, though, I do not know. These are extraordinarily difficult issues. I go back to my answer to Mark, which was that, fundamentally, we need to look after our people, because if we look after our people, there is a sporting chance that they will fight for us.

**Chair:** Thank you. Speaking of looking after our people, Derek Twigg is going to take us forward on women in the Armed Forces.

Q109 **Derek Twigg:** General, did you read our report our report on women in the armed services?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Yes.

Q110 **Derek Twigg:** Were you shocked? Were you not surprised?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I was not surprised. What it did for me was to recognise that we still have an extraordinarily long way to go, as institutions, to get after this issue.

Q111 **Derek Twigg:** Recent FOI requests have shown a tenfold increase in the number of girls under 18 in the Armed Forces who are reporting complaints of rape and sexual assault to the military police. The question we have, as a Committee, is: why does the military continue to have a lingering misogynistic culture, and behaviours to match?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** On that statistic you just cited, do you know how many people were asked about it? Do you know how big the population is below the age of 18?

Q112 **Derek Twigg:** You tell me.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I am asking. I wonder, from the report, what—

Q113 **Derek Twigg:** You tell me.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I do not know. I am guessing, but I would think it is quite small numbers. That would be my guess, but I do not know. I do not know the figures—I am very happy to come back to you with them. That would be my observation—

Q114 **Derek Twigg:** I am not sure what point you are trying to make. Are you saying that quite small numbers of women went in or quite small numbers have been assaulted and raped?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** What I am saying is that you have to look at the experience of all 20,000 women serving in the Armed Forces, and there will be—

Q115 **Chair:** Sorry to interject—I do not mean to interrupt you—but some of us participated in the Sub-Committee on this issue and we were shocked by how frank the evidence given to us by women was. The session I was in was with women in the Navy. They said there was a culture of having to accept that they were treated in ways that were simply not acceptable—were not acceptable when I served as a regular and are certainly not acceptable today. So I hear what you—

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** To be fair, you interrupted me. I was going on to say that we need to look at all cohorts, and in doing that we will be very clear that we need to do a great deal more about it than we are currently able to achieve. I am in no doubt about that. The point I was making was simply to say let us look at the whole problem, rather than just a specific part of the problem.

Q116 **Derek Twigg:** To come back to your point, there was an average of 215 girls under 18 serving between 2015 and 2020. It is said to be an equivalence of one report for every 40 girls.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** That is truly shocking.

Q117 **Derek Twigg:** But even if it were smaller, it doesn't matter. One is too many. The point of the question was that he was trying to suggest that it wasn't that many.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I want to go further than that. I want to get into the other 20,000 because one needs to look at all the cohorts that we have.

Q118 **Derek Twigg:** I understand what you have said and you have talked about your concerns, but could you tell the Committee how we change that? It has to come from the top, but how do we show that to leaders at company, platoon and barrack level? How do we ensure they do something to weed this out and stop it happening?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** It is about leadership. It is fundamentally about leadership. The day I took over as Chief of the General Staff, there was a report on bullying, harassment and discrimination in my in-tray. That goaded me to do a great deal about it as Chief of the Defence Staff. It goaded me into realising that I needed to grip the Army's leadership.

As a consequence of that, we created things called command sergeant majors who provided, in a sense, a parallel line, not of command but of understanding, right down to the barrack room. We created the Army leadership code and an Army leadership centre, and we got after toxic leadership. We began to get people to recognise that there need to be downwardly looking leaders not upwardly looking leaders.

Q119 **Derek Twigg:** So why is it still a problem?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Because I think we are talking about long-term cultural change. You can have a go at it for four years, but you cannot take your foot off the accelerator. You have to keep going at this. Part of the reason you have to do that, I am afraid, and I am on the record as having said this as CGS and as CDS, is that we do also, out of the other side of our mouth, encourage a laddish culture. Part of the reason we encourage a laddish culture is that ultimately our soldiers have to go close and personal with the enemy. You have to try and square both these outputs, and that is what we have to work on.

Q120 **Derek Twigg:** That is no excuse for drinking and attacking women, is it?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** No, of course it is not. One has to get people who are building these teams to understand that the team will be a better team if it is more diverse and inclusive. Indeed, women, ethnic minorities and all the rest of it are therefore part of the equation. That is why I talk about maximising potential. If you are talking about maximising potential, you get people to recognise that everybody has got something to contribute, and you ought to be finding a way for all of them to contribute to it. There is a fundamental cultural shift that needs to be made there.

There should be no doubt that the Chiefs of Staff Committee get this. They have signed an extraordinarily forthright statement of commitment, which

you are welcome to see, which gets after what we are trying to do here. The trick now is how you cascade that level of commitment down through the layers of the chain of command, to get people right down at the face of what we are talking about to understand that this is totally unacceptable. That is something that people get. I think we have a sense of how we fix it, but we are going to have to keep going at it hard.

Q121 **Derek Twigg:** Sorry, just so I am clear, at a ship level, on air bases, on Army bases and down to section level, what evidence have you got that where commanders fail you are doing something in terms of disciplinary proceedings to remove people? How many people have been removed because of some of the terrible incidents that have occurred under their command?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** These are issues that the service chiefs wrestle with on a daily basis. The service chiefs are under no doubt that there is a zero-tolerance attitude to the sorts of behaviours you are describing.

Q122 **Derek Twigg:** How many have been dismissed?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I do not know. I have no idea. I am very happy to come back to you, but unfortunately, as the Chief of Defence Staff, the number of people dismissed is not something I live on a daily basis, because I do not have any authority to dismiss people.

**Derek Twigg:** No, I just thought that with you coming here and your serious decision, you might have some more information for us.

**Chair:** We will pursue this further. We are conscious that the Defence Secretary had to bring in the service chiefs, particularly the Army Board, and we know that is separate to your bailiwick, but we are concerned to see this information.

As I mentioned, in the Sub-Committee I was involved with, it was all three services, but most recently the Defence Secretary has had to have discussions with the Army Board about the core and culture issues. That is certainly concerning and something that we will be taking up with your successor. Thank you for your questions, Derek. I know you have to slide away, so I turn to Stuart.

Q123 **Stuart Anderson:** I am going to move on to what Admiral Radakin said about the three-year term for CDS. You had your three years extended to three and a half years. Is three years long enough not just for CDS but for other senior military officials, or are you leaving with a lot of unfinished business? What could you have achieved if you had had longer, or is it just about right? I am keen to hear your views.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I will have done eight years as a chief of staff when I finish, which I think is longer than any chief of staff since Lord Mountbatten. I can tell you that I am tired, and I am definitely ready to have a rest.

I also think that I have carried forward some of the things that I did in the Army into my role as Chief of Defence Staff. I think there is definitely

something about longer-term continuity and the opportunity to be able to make a difference, but it does slightly depend on what you have done before you get the job and how long you have got to do it.

I also think that you still need to be having good ideas. There is a balance in all these things between having refreshing, good ideas and seeing things through. I definitely think that, if you have got the energy, three years is probably not long enough; you probably need to do four. Indeed, that is what my American opposite number does and what a lot of my European opposite numbers do. I suspect that four years is probably better—but, again, if you get the wrong one, you might say that you want him out after two. All these things have to be taken into account.

**Chair:** The same thing applies to politics as well.

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** Surely not.

Q124 **Stuart Anderson:** To finish off, thank you for what you have done in 45 years of service. What is your single proudest moment of those 45 years?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I think it is probably what I felt I had achieved in southern Afghanistan, commanding in Kandahar, where, for a period of a year—it flowed forward for another couple of years—I think we genuinely made a difference in what were pretty impossible circumstances. But, as I have said at many of the valedictory events that I am going through during the course of the month, nothing beats the relationship that you have with the people you command. To be honest, bringing forth the goods of those that you command is probably the thing that one will look back on as being the most rewarding thing that one has done.

**Stuart Anderson:** I agree, having served under your command.

Q125 **Mr Francois:** I think that Lord Levene—Peter Levene—who knows quite a bit about the MoD, also felt strongly about expanding the term slightly. I do not know whether he is watching the session, but, if he is, I imagine he was nodding when you said at least four years.

You and I have not always agreed about everything down the years, but, for what it is worth, thank you for your service. Lastly, to end on a light-hearted note, what is the book called?

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I am not sure that I am going to write one yet. And if I do, it will not be a memoir.

**Richard Drax:** May I put on record my thanks to you for 45 years of service? It is a remarkable record. Thank you.

Q126 **Chair:** General, tired, weary and, after 45 years, ready for a rest—

***General Sir Nick Carter:*** I'm bright and bushy, don't you worry. We will run the race till the end.

**Chair:** We are very grateful, as has been articulated, for what you have done in sharing your thoughts and being open and candid today. We are also grateful for a lifetime's service. You absolutely deserve a rest. On

behalf of the Committee, Parliament and—I hope—a grateful nation, may I thank you for your service? That brings the session to a close. We will move into a private session. Thank you to colleagues and to the staff.