



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Liaison Committee

Oral evidence from the Prime Minister, HC 835

Wednesday 17 November 2021

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Members present: Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Karen Bradley; Chris Bryant; Sarah Champion; Greg Clark; Yvette Cooper; Philip Dunne; Mr Tobias Ellwood; Jeremy Hunt; Darren Jones; Julian Knight; Angus Brendan MacNeil; Sir Robert Neill; Caroline Nokes; Neil Parish; Mel Stride; Stephen Timms; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-170

Witness

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



Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon. Boris Johnson MP.

Q1 Chair: I welcome my colleagues and of course the Prime Minister to this session of the Liaison Committee. We will try to cover four main topics: standards and ethics, violence against women and online harms, the outcome of the COP26 summit and its implementation, and the Budget and spending review. We have 15 colleagues participating in this session so, Prime Minister, I request that you give us your customary extra time—and even a little bit extra—if you can afford it, so that we can cover all of the topics. I would be very grateful for that.

The Prime Minister: I will do my best to oblige you, as ever, Sir Bernard. I have got quite a lot on, but I will do my best.

Chair: I appreciate that. Prime Minister, you are slightly hoarse of voice this afternoon. You can save your voice by giving nice, short answers.

The Prime Minister: Not if you keep me for longer.

Chair: I shall give the Committee short shrift if their questions are too long, although they are entitled to use their time as they please. We will go straight to the first topic, with William Wragg, the Chairman of PACAC.

Q2 Mr Wragg: Thank you, Sir Bernard. Good afternoon, Prime Minister. Can you understand the public mood, in much of the country, about standards issues around Members of Parliament and Ministers? Would you care to reflect on that in light of the events of a couple of weeks ago?

The Prime Minister: Yes. Thank you, Mr Wragg. I think that there is a feeling that we need to be getting on and ensuring that we have the utmost propriety in our dealings with each other and with the public, and that the public can have full confidence in the system.

What I would like to place on record, although I have said it before, is that I think it was a mistake, two weeks ago, to conflate the very sad and difficult case of a particular colleague who had fallen foul of the Commissioner for Standards and the standards process, and the need—as many colleagues saw it, rightly or wrongly—for reform and improvement to the system, and particularly to the system for appeals in the event of very difficult cases. What I hoped to achieve was some sort of cross-party progress on that; plainly, that wasn't possible. What I would like to see now is cross-party progress on endorsing some of the, I think, very useful conclusions of the report of the independent committee on standards and privileges of 2018.

Q3 Mr Wragg: Thank you. Specifically, on the ministerial code—as I am sure that the Chair of the Standards Committee will have further questions—how do you view the ministerial code? Do you see it as a constitutional document? Do you see it as a guide? Do you see it as advisory? What is its status in your eyes?



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The Prime Minister: I think the ministerial code is extremely important. As you know, it has been greatly strengthened in the last few years and elaborated, in very clear terms, to give guidance for Ministers. What I have done is brought in an independent advisor to me, as I am the upholder—the guarantor—of the ministerial code, but what I think I benefit from is independent advice about how to implement it, and that's what Lord Geidt provides.

Q4 **Mr Wragg:** As well as that oversight, you, as Prime Minister, are bound by the ministerial code. Is that right?

The Prime Minister: Of course.

Q5 **Mr Wragg:** Do you sense a slight conflict of interest in that settlement? Might not the independent advisor do well to be invested with the powers of initiation of investigation?

The Prime Minister: That's a very good question. I think there are difficult constitutional issues raised in that, but where we've got to is that Lord Geidt has the ability to suggest to me that something might be worth investigating, or that there is some issue that has been raised under the ministerial code, and I think it's highly unlikely that I would, in any circumstances, disagree with him, and we proceed on that basis. I find him an exceptionally valuable source of advice. To give a recent example, the Committee will have noted that the Business Secretary wrote a letter to the Commissioner for Standards setting out an explanation and an apology for some recent comments. That was certainly something that was generated in the course of consultation between me and Lord Geidt.

Q6 **Mr Wragg:** Traditionally, breaches of the code have meant resignation or sacking—one or the other. Do you think it is therefore too much of a blunt instrument? Could you update us on any progress that has been made on a gradation of sanctions that might make the ministerial code more applicable?

The Prime Minister: Yes, that is another important point. The ministerial code is quite compendious; it covers a lot of things. As it was initially constituted, it was basically a hair-trigger code so that one toecap over any of the red lines and you were finished. It is the view of Lord Geidt, and I think it is reasonable, that there should be gradations and ways in which there should be other sanctions, and that a breach—a small breach, I should say—of the ministerial code should not necessarily lead to resignations. That is his view, as I understand it.

Q7 **Mr Wragg:** Following the Greensill episode, if we might describe it as that, you commissioned Nigel Boardman to review what had happened. Part 2 of that was published recently, admittedly in the middle of the Government reshuffle. Have you considered those recommendations? In particular, do you think that ACOBA's recommendations of employment restrictions on former Ministers should be made legally binding, as Boardman suggests?



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The Prime Minister: We are considering the Boardman recommendations, Mr Wragg, and we will report back to you and your Committee.

Q8 **Mr Wragg:** But in this moment, Prime Minister, what are your instinctive thoughts on that?

The Prime Minister: I certainly think that the ACOBA process is invaluable, and it should be incumbent upon anybody leaving public office to follow those rules.

Q9 **Mr Wragg:** A pretty toothless organisation, though.

The Prime Minister: No, people have to abide by the ACOBA rules. The Cabinet Office—Simon Case and others—are leading work with ACOBA and Eric Pickles to see what improvements can be made, and we will be reporting back.

Q10 **Mr Wragg:** But with respect, they do not have to follow the recommendations; they can do what they like. They are issued with a very polite letter, but they can simply disregard that. There are quite a few examples of that, so it is a pretty toothless organisation. Do you think, therefore, as part of this work that we are taking forward, it can be strengthened?

The Prime Minister: We do think that there is scope for improving it. What I am saying to you is that, as a result, we have not yet formed a hard and fast view about how to do that.

Mr Wragg: Thank you.

Q11 **Chair:** When do you think you will form a view on that matter, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: We will be updating later this year.

Chair: Later this year. That is excellent; thank you.

The Prime Minister: Not that there is much left of this year, but later this year.

Q12 **Chris Bryant:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. Can I just check something? In one of your answers there, you said that the Business Secretary had written to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards apologising; excellent. As I understand it, you were saying that Lord Geidt had asked him to do so.

The Prime Minister: That is not quite what I said. I said that the process by which the letter was generated was one that involved a collaboration between me and Lord Geidt and my reliance upon him for his advice, and that is a very important thing.

Q13 **Chris Bryant:** So you told the Business Secretary to apologise.



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The Prime Minister: That is a matter between me and the Business Secretary, but if you mean did Lord Geidt ask the Business Secretary to apologise, the answer to that is no.

Q14 **Chris Bryant:** But you are not telling us whether or not you did. Some of us might gently suggest to you that we were surprised that the Business Secretary would freelance when he went on the air. One presumed that you had asked him to go on the air to call for the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to resign.

The Prime Minister: No, that is obviously not right. No, I did not do that.

Q15 **Chris Bryant:** Did you know in advance that he was going to do that?

The Prime Minister: No. Just to clear the matter up, since I do not want to leave any ambiguity for the Committee, I certainly thought it was appropriate for the Business Secretary to write in the way that he did, and supported him in that.

Q16 **Chris Bryant:** Okay. Why is the list of ministerial interests published only twice a year? Most of every year, it is not even an accurate list of Ministers, let alone of their interests.

The Prime Minister: The list of ministerial interests is there to be consulted. In so far as Ministers also serve as MPs, which of course they do, their parliamentary interests are there to be consulted and to be updated at very regular intervals.

Q17 **Chris Bryant:** The Commons publishes a rolling register, which includes everything, every fortnight. You can see the whole of the House of Commons on a single document. But the Government tuck all the details for Ministers away in 232 separate documents online. That is not really transparency, is it?

The Prime Minister: I disagree. MPs who are Ministers—that is the majority of Ministers—have to register all their interests in the parliamentary register—

Chris Bryant: Oh but they don't, all of them, do they?

The Prime Minister—and there is the additional register of ministerial interests.

Q18 **Chris Bryant:** Okay, let me give you an example. If two MPs were sitting next to each other in a box, being wined and dined as guests of some business or industry body, and one was a Back-Bench MP and the other was a Government Minister, the Back-Bench MP would have to register this with the House of Commons within 28 days and would have to give details of the amount it cost, but the Minister would not have to register the amount of money that it cost at all, ever, and the registration would only appear six months later. That is just unfair, isn't it? Shouldn't there be one rule for everybody?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that most MPs who had been taken out to dinner would register their interest in the register of interests—



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Q19 **Chris Bryant:** So you think Ministers should?

The Prime Minister: I think the system that we have is the one that I inherited and it seems to work pretty well, but if you have recommendations to improve it, Mr Bryant, I am sure that the House would be interested to see them.

Q20 **Chris Bryant:** Excellent—thank you. May I ask you, because I don't quite understand, whether you think that Owen Paterson was guilty or not?

The Prime Minister: I think it was a very sad case, but I think there was no question but that he had fallen foul of the rules on paid advocacy, as far as I could see from the report. I think the question that people wanted to establish was whether or not, given the particularly tragic circumstances, he had had a fair right to appeal.

Q21 **Chris Bryant:** He had an appeal. His appeal was heard—endlessly—by the Committee.

The Prime Minister: Mr Bryant, I wish to restate that in forming the impression that the former Member for North Shropshire had not had a fair process, I may well have been mistaken, but that was certainly the impression that many people seemed to have.

Q22 **Chris Bryant:** Theresa May said yesterday that your actions over this case were “misplaced, ill-judged and just plain wrong”.

The Prime Minister: I have said several times now that I do think it was a mistake to conflate, as we did, those two things in a particularly difficult case. It is not often in the House of Commons that a colleague suffers a family bereavement in the course of an investigation. There was quite a lot of feeling about it, and for that reason, in a spirit of compassion, I thought it might be useful to see whether there was any cross-party support—

Q23 **Chris Bryant:** But you didn't approach cross-party at all, did you? You told John Whittingdale that there was a cross-party agreement to set up this committee, but that wasn't the case, was it?

The Prime Minister: So it would seem.

Q24 **Chris Bryant:** Why did you tell him that?

The Prime Minister: I cannot comment on that conversation, since I did not have it. What I can say is that I believed that there would be cross-party support for the idea—

Q25 **Chris Bryant:** How did you believe this—you came up with it just out of your head?

The Prime Minister: It was put to me that—

Q26 **Chris Bryant:** By whom?

The Prime Minister: By colleagues, that people would feel—indeed, I was fortified in this by the reflection that many people would have felt that this was a particularly difficult and sad case and that many people across the House would have felt a degree of sympathy for the Member for



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Shropshire North and would have thought that, in those particular circumstances, it might have been possible to consider whether the process was capable of improvement. I am very willing to accept that I was mistaken in that belief.

- Q27 **Chris Bryant:** The problem is that you say that the country is not corrupt, but what Owen Paterson did was a corrupt practice: it was lobbying Ministers and officials on behalf of his paying clients. That is a corrupt practice, and the danger is that by all of this you have tarred the whole of the House with the same brush—and yourself, haven't you?

The Prime Minister: If you recall what I said, Mr Bryant, at Prime Minister's questions on that Wednesday, I began by saying that paid advocacy and lobbying is against the rules and anybody who does that should be properly penalised. That was how I began, so the intention, genuinely, was not to exonerate anybody; the intention was to see whether there was some way in which, on a cross-party basis, we could improve the system.

In retrospect, it was obviously, obviously mistaken to think that we could conflate the two things. Do I regret that decision? Yes, I certainly do, Mr Bryant.

- Q28 **Chair:** Looking forward, Prime Minister, you will accept the recommendations of the Standards Committee that are agreed between the parties and that have the consensus. The Government will facilitate the implementation of those changes.

The Prime Minister: Which changes?

- Q29 **Chair:** Whichever changes the Standards Committee comes up with, agreed between all the parties.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I think what we are saying is that there should be—are you talking about changes to the standards system?

Chair: Indeed.

The Prime Minister: Of course, and I hope that there can be cross-party progress on that. I further hope that there can be cross-party progress, whether in the Standards Committee or in some other cross-party body of the House, on the issues that I described earlier, and I described in the House, relating to the conditions and stipulations under which we serve and are able to have outside trades, callings, professions, interests and so on—which, as the independent Committee has said, is of use to the House.

- Q30 **Chair:** I want to follow up the question raised by Mr Wragg, for which I have great sympathy because his Committee, under my chairmanship, reached the same conclusion about the ability of the independent adviser to instigate investigations.

I still do not understand the objection that you have to this. You say that you will almost always accept his recommendations to have an investigation. Now that you are going to be encouraged to take control of the sanctions and mitigate the sanctions to reflect circumstances, what is



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the objection to allowing the independent adviser to instigate his own inquiries? I don't understand it.

The Prime Minister: Thank you. What the independent adviser—you mean Lord Geidt?

Chair: Yes.

The Prime Minister: The ministerial adviser. So what Lord Geidt can certainly do under the new dispensation that we have agreed is suggest to me at his own initiative—

Q31 **Chair:** But under what circumstances would you want to veto that?

The Prime Minister—something that he thinks bears investigation or needs to be corrected or where something has gone wrong. As I said, I think, in my opening answer, it is hard to think of circumstances in which I would want to overrule him.

Q32 **Chair:** I cannot imagine any either, so why not just give him the power? I hope you will reflect on that.

The Prime Minister: I think people can see that the balance of the situation is, I think, well judged at the moment.

Q33 **Yvette Cooper:** Welcome, Prime Minister. Can I follow up and quickly clarify some of the responses you have just given to William Wragg and Chris Bryant? This is an area where we really need clarity, given your important role. You used a slightly odd form of words in response to William Wragg. You said, "it was a mistake...to conflate the very sad and difficult case of a particular colleague who had fallen foul of the Commissioner for Standards". Could you just clarify, do you believe that Owen Paterson broke the rules? Yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Yes. At least that seems to me to—

Q34 **Chair:** Yes, you do?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. As I said at the beginning of PMQs two weeks ago, we did not seek to in any way minimise the importance of that. People who break the rules on paid advocacy must pay the price.

Q35 **Yvette Cooper:** You are still qualifying it. You are still saying, "Well, it seems to me." Do you recognise that, given your responsibility to uphold the ministerial code, to uphold the rules, to uphold the standards—

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do.

Yvette Cooper: —it is really important that you should not give any impressions that, when there is an independent report that found 14 occasions of paid lobbying, somehow you think that is okay.

The Prime Minister: No, I didn't.

Q36 **Yvette Cooper:** Can you clarify that you don't think it is okay and you don't think what Owen Paterson did was right?



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The Prime Minister: Of course I don't, and that was the first thing I said when I began on this subject two weeks ago. Frankly, I think it is extraordinary that colleagues sometimes do behave in this way, and it is quite right that the Commissioner is able to investigate and to hold them to account. All we sought to do—I think the Committee will agree that I have accepted that it was a mistake and that it was my mistake—was to see whether, in view of the particular and frankly tragic circumstances of the case, there was any scope for cross-party agreement on an appeals process. That was all we were trying to do.

Q37 **Yvette Cooper:** And given that you have said that you did ask the Business Secretary to apologise, and the Cabinet Office Secretary has also apologised, would you express your own regret for not having said three weeks ago that Owen Paterson broke the rules, which would have provided clarity about the standards that you expect to be upheld?

The Prime Minister: I began—two weeks ago, I think it was—by saying that those who broke the rules should pay a price.

Q38 **Yvette Cooper:** No, the issue is whether you should have said three weeks ago that Owen Paterson—

The Prime Minister: Yes, in retrospect—thank you. In retrospect it might have helped a bit if I had said that I believed that Owen had broken the rules, as far as I could see.

Q39 **Yvette Cooper:** Again, you say “as far as I could see.” You have an independent process that has looked into this. Every time you say, “as far as I could see” or “Well, it seems to me”, and you try and qualify it, you are undermining an independent system that we need to work. All of us need this to work. We need you to have some integrity. We need you to be able to uphold the standards.

The Prime Minister: Yes. Then let me repeat: it was clear to me that he had broken the rules and he had fallen foul of the rules that we have in Parliament. I made clear at the outset in my first answer in PMQs that, for me, that is something that deserves punishment. My question was, in all humility, given the particular circumstances of the case, whether there was any cross-party support for improvement to the system. That was what we were trying to achieve. I can now see that that was a mistake. I also think it was a mistake not to go ahead with the 2018 report of the independent Committee on Standards in Public Life. I think the House should have implemented those conclusions as well.

Q40 **Yvette Cooper:** Do you also accept that the problem is that, with all the prevaricating and all the attempting to still be defensive about the things that, actually, everybody accepts that you got wrong, whether it is your reluctance to—

The Prime Minister: I am not remotely prevaricating.

Q41 **Yvette Cooper:** It sounds a lot like prevarication. There is a whole series of things that create an impression that is very unfortunate and is very damaging to public life. Whether it is not wearing a mask in Hexham



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Hospital or defending colleagues who have broken the rules in a series of different cases, do you accept that you have a responsibility to go above and beyond, to go further than everybody should expect and to establish much higher standards?

The Prime Minister: I do. Thank you, Ms Cooper. Yes, I think it was a total mistake not to see that Owen's breach of the rules—the former Member for North Shropshire's breach of the rules—made any discussion about anything else impossible, and I totally accept that.

But as for not wearing a mask in Hexham Hospital, which you wrap up into my general litany of crime, can I just say that, actually, there was barely 30 seconds when I was not wearing a mask? I walked out of a room mistakenly not wearing it. I then put it on as soon as I realised I'd made that mistake. I apologise for it, but most pictures of my visit to the hospital will show that I was duly masked throughout the remainder of the visit. I was masked on the way into the visit. But I thank you for giving me the opportunity to clear that up.

Q42 **Yvette Cooper:** Let me briefly ask you about the—*[Interruption.]* I am not, actually, because I did not start until 3.20. Let me briefly ask you about violence against women and girls. Less than 1% of actual rapes are prosecuted, and less than 2% of reported rapes. You have set a target to get prosecution rates back up to 2016 levels by the end of the Parliament, but you have said that it is going to be really hard to meet that target even though it is only 11%. Why is that? When it is such a shocking crime, why are we effectively letting 99% of rapists off and letting so many victims down?

The Prime Minister: Well, Yvette—Ms Cooper—that is an incredibly important question. It is something I am campaigning and working flat out on now in Government. I lead the crime and justice taskforce; this is our No. 1 priority. You ask why it is so difficult. There are many reasons but, as you will recall, there was a particular case in 2018 in which the evidence from a mobile phone was used by the defence to exonerate an alleged perpetrator of rape. Since then, I am afraid there has been a huge reliance on mobile phone data by defence counsel—*[Interruption.]* It is a very important point—

Yvette Cooper: I understand.

The Prime Minister: I just want to tell you what we are doing about it.

Chair: You have had nearly eight minutes, Yvette.

Q43 **Yvette Cooper:** You have said that it is your top priority for police forces, but you have refused to put it in the strategic policing requirement, which includes terrorism, child exploitation and organised crime. Will you review this? If it is your top priority, will you put it into the strategic policing requirement and make it a requirement for forces across the country?

The Prime Minister: We are making it the top priority for our police. Maggie Blyth, the deputy chief constable, has taken over the lead for it. We are insisting that mobile phones are handed back to victims within 24



hours. One of the reasons we have such victim attrition, and one of the reasons we have such low prosecution rates, is because victims don't feel confident in the system. We are going ahead, under section 28, with allowing victims to pre-record their evidence, to give them more confidence, and we are putting a lot of money into ISVAs and IDVAs— independent sexual and domestic violence advisers—so that they can help victims through the very difficult period of the trial, again to stop this attrition of victims and the failure to prosecute enough people. We are also investing in many more prosecutors.

Chair: Caroline Nokes.

Q44 **Caroline Nokes:** Thank you, Chair.

Do you agree that there is a ladder of offending when it comes to violence against women and girls and that those who might perpetrate crimes like indecent exposure then move on to far more serious crimes like rape, kidnap and murder?

The Prime Minister: I do believe there is evidence to support that. If you look in particular at the case of Wayne Couzens, that was something that, frankly, should have been picked up. That is unquestionably going to form part of the investigation into what went wrong in that case.

Q45 **Caroline Nokes:** Could there then also be a case for making crimes such as public sexual harassment specific crimes, perhaps through the PCSC Bill, which will come back to the Commons soon?

The Prime Minister: We have quite a lot of statute, of one kind or another, against serious assault, sexual violence, rape and harassment, and, as Yvette Cooper has just been saying, the tragedy at the moment is that we are not enforcing this enough as it is. I have to think about how really to tackle the crimes that the public want tackled, rather than widening the range of human conduct that we ask the police to criminalise and enforce against. What I want to see is proper enforcement of the existing law and, as Yvette was saying, much more prosecution for those who are accused of rape, and at the moment that is where the numbers are going wrong.

Q46 **Caroline Nokes:** Having agreed that there is a ladder of offending, should we not have a plan to intervene earlier, before those who are harassing women become sex offenders?

The Prime Minister: I think that what we need to do, rather than expanding the sphere of activity that we criminalise, is prosecute people more effectively and successfully for the things that are already criminal. There is an abundance of statute that is not being properly enforced, and that is what we are putting our investment into.

Q47 **Caroline Nokes:** Baroness Newlove has put down an amendment to the PCSC Bill that would make misogyny a hate crime. Do you have any views on the progress that has been made on encouraging women to come forward? Some 75% of them in Nottinghamshire, where the pilot is being carried out, now feel that they have had a positive outcome, so



should we not expand that?

The Prime Minister: I will study what Baroness Newlove has come up with, and I am glad that women have the confidence to come forward—that is always very important. But I think that the best way to tackle misogyny and to give women confidence is to deal with the abundance of courses of conduct that are already illegal and that we are not doing enough to tackle and not prosecuting enough—in particular, rape. That is why we want to double prosecutions for rape, and we are now seeing a small increase.

Q48 **Caroline Nokes:** You are right to focus on the efforts going in to increase rape prosecutions, but one of the real challenges is that women do not feel confident about coming forward to report incidents. Is it not fair to say that if public sexual harassment was a specific crime that they, the police and, indeed, the Crown Prosecution Service could point at, we might see women having more confidence to come forward?

The Prime Minister: I think that all women should have the confidence to come forward and denounce the harassment or crime against them that they have experienced, and there are proper procedures for those claims and complaints to be investigated.

Q49 **Caroline Nokes:** One of the cultures underpinning male violence against women is the easy access to extreme, violent and degrading pornography. Can we have any confidence that the online harms legislation, which you have said we will get to vote on before Christmas, will do anything to address that? We know that people like Wayne Couzens access that sort of pornography. Should we be doing something to stop people like him getting access to it?

The Prime Minister: I think that is an incredibly important point, because when you look at the evidence of people like Wayne Couzens—not just him but also, I am afraid, terrorist offenders and many others—it is clear that people are coarsened and degraded by this stuff. We will see what we can do. The technological difficulties are quite extreme, but it is up to the online giants to make sure that they do not have this stuff on their systems. We will take the steps necessary to hold them to account, and that is what the online harms Bill is designed to do.

Q50 **Caroline Nokes:** So can we have confidence that there will be legislation forcing the massive online giants to do that?

The Prime Minister: I think it is time the online giants realised that they cannot simply think of themselves as neutral pieces of infrastructure. They are publishers and they have responsibility for what appears on their systems. The online harms Bill is designed to give effect to that distinction.

Q51 **Caroline Nokes:** One final question quickly, Bernard. If there is a challenge around the culture that underpins male violence against women, should we start addressing that in schools, and should we look to make consent classes compulsory?



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The Prime Minister: I think that kids nowadays are given much, much better and more balanced instruction about these questions than was the case even 10 years ago, never mind 20, 30 years ago, but there is a way to go, and it is certainly something that I am willing to look at.

Caroline Nokes: Thank you.

Chair: Julian Knight, for the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Q52 **Julian Knight:** Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, Prime Minister. Do you think that acts that are illegal offline should be illegal when committed online?

The Prime Minister: Give an example.

Julian Knight: Cyber-flashing.

The Prime Minister: Sorry?

Julian Knight: Cyber-flashing. I can give a description if you would like, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Cyber-flashing? Yes, I do not care whether flashing is cyber or not, it should be illegal.

Q53 **Julian Knight:** If that is the case, will you commit to expand the present definitions of online harms—at the moment, we look at terrorism and child exploitation—and place a specific duty of care, following on from your answer to my hon. Friend, on the social media giants, to include such crimes as flashing and assisting self-harm—pushing people towards suicide, Prime Minister—on the face, crucially, of the online harms Bill?

The Prime Minister: I thank you very much for your suggestion. I will make sure that we look at it. As colleagues know, the online harms Bill is due to leave the Joint Committee—

Q54 **Julian Knight:** With respect, though, Prime Minister, the difficulty that we have is that there will not be another Online Safety Bill in this Parliament, and there may not be one in another Parliament. So are you prepared to shun the opportunity right now to protect women and girls from vile acts such as those we described before—cyber-flashing?

The Prime Minister: The answer to your question is, yes, if we can do something in the online harms Bill to stop cyber-flashing, which is clearly a scourge that is developing, then—

Q55 **Julian Knight:** It is not just about that. It also folds into violence against women and girls and the whole strategy around this. Here is a key piece of legislative intervention that will become the law of the House, and so far the scope is so narrow, with all the lobbying that goes on. It is just the idea that maybe—

The Prime Minister: If you can draft something that will capture it, let us have a look at it. It sounds like a useful—



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Q56 **Julian Knight:** Given that there is a five-day time lag between the reporting of the Joint Committee and the promise to present legislation, can we just be clear: will we have the Second Reading, as you promised at the Dispatch Box, of online harms legislation before Christmas? Yes or no?

The Prime Minister: I think that depends on the Joint Committee, I am afraid to say—as far as I understand it.

Q57 **Julian Knight:** But Prime Minister, you said at the Dispatch Box that you would bring legislation forward before Christmas.

The Prime Minister: If the Joint Committee can conclude its work in due time.

Q58 **Julian Knight:** With respect, they are charged with doing that five days earlier, so you will have five days between the Joint Committee reporting and the legislation, as you promised at the Dispatch Box, being presented to the House. Will you do that before Christmas? Yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Well, if the Joint Committee reports in time, then yes.

Q59 **Julian Knight:** It will report.

The Prime Minister: Well, then, fine.

Q60 **Julian Knight:** So you will do it if they report five days before?

The Prime Minister: We will report as soon as we can after the Joint Committee has concluded its work.

Q61 **Julian Knight:** Is that before Christmas?

The Prime Minister: If it can be done before Christmas, I think that would be a great thing. As far as I understand it, the Joint Committee is due to report before Christmas. After that, I do not know what the delay might be between bringing it back before the House and—

Q62 **Julian Knight:** Another thing you said at the Dispatch Box is that you wanted to see potential criminal sanctions for social media giants if they fail in their duty of care. That leaves a lot of wriggle room with the word “potential”. I would like to find out what you actually have in mind. Will you incorporate a criminal sanction in the Bill—in primary legislation—rather than incorporating the potential at a later date for the Secretary of State to introduce secondary legislation and thereby introduce a criminal sanction? Criminal sanctions now or at the discretion of the Secretary of State?

The Prime Minister: I share your anxiety, Mr Knight, about the deferred sanctions that we are currently looking at. Let me take that away.

Q63 **Julian Knight:** All right. Is that just to take away? Do you actually think that they should be in place in the Bill itself?

The Prime Minister: Let me put it this way. I think we want the strongest possible deterrent and the strongest possible sanctions against



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people who run online companies who are allowing a torrent of hateful stuff to appear on their networks.

- Q64 **Julian Knight:** A final question, Prime Minister. You said to me on 24 March in the Liaison Committee that you would ensure that EU visas for creatives and those in the touring industry would be “sorted”—I am directly quoting you: you would get it sorted.

Since then, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has had a total of four meetings, all with Spain, and none with any other countries. We have the issue of Lord Frost failing to attend my Committee for a long period of time until I had to put a point of order to the House. How is four meetings in eight months getting it sorted?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to you for the work that you are doing. I know that at least 20 member states, including France and Germany, now offer visa and work permit-free routes for touring musicians. I think I read just yesterday or today that progress had been made in Spain. We are continuing to push very hard.

- Q65 **Julian Knight:** Does that not show, Prime Minister, that actually meeting them does make a difference—that we should go and meet our bilateral partners in order to negotiate these deals? The issue is that we are losing huge swathes of the touring industry. We were the centre of touring. It is far bigger than many other industries that we take a lot more time over. I wonder whether or not it would now be time to genuinely face up to this and to go and have these bilaterals.

At the same time, the idea of these other countries—that was a press release from several months ago. Take my word for it: nothing has happened since March in terms of progress, until very lately as a result of those Spanish negotiations.

The Prime Minister: Okay, I fully accept your criticism. What I would say is that the circumstances have also been pretty difficult for touring of any kind for a long time. What we want to see is markets opening up for touring musicians and for tourists of all kinds. We want to see many more people coming to London, whether they are musicians or not. We shall be making an effort to ensure that happens.

- Q66 **Chair:** We are going to come back to this subject, Prime Minister. It is a subject I feel very strongly about and I think the Government could make a more co-ordinated effort.

Could I just go back to the question of violence against women? Since Sarah Everard was murdered, about 80 more women have been murdered, nearly all by men. At a time when women are feeling so vulnerable, what are you going to do to demonstrate that the Government are behind them? For example, will you guarantee the safe spaces for women based on their sex, such as changing rooms, hospital wards, prisons and so on, which they feel are under threat?

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Sir Bernard. It is appalling to see crimes of violence against women. That is why I said in my answer to Yvette that



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it was our No. 1 priority. What we are trying to do is all sorts of measures, from the stalking protection order, the Domestic Abuse Act, steps we are trying to take to increase prosecutions for rape—we are doing all that.

I am not going to pretend that this is making the progress that I would like or that it is going as fast as I would want, but it is an absolute priority for the Government. We are doing things that make a small difference, such as putting a lot more money into streetlights. We have many more female police officers, for instance; I think 42% of the Met is now female—sorry, 42% of the recruits are now female. So we are changing the culture, but we will not rest until women have confidence in the system, confidence in the streets and confidence that they will get justice when they are attacked.

Q67 **Chair:** And you have been clear in your message to the Joint Committee looking at the Online Safety Bill that you would like them to include extreme violent pornography as an online harm, and we need to protect our children from that?

The Prime Minister: I do think that, yes.

Chair: Thank you. We are miles behind, of course, but can we move on to Bob Neill?

Q68 **Sir Robert Neill:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. Can I go back to conviction levels for rape cases? You are aware of the concern about them. You would accept, of course, that there should only ever be a conviction if a jury is satisfied beyond reasonable doubt on lawfully admissible evidence as to the guilt of the person concerned? Yes?

The Prime Minister *indicated assent.*

Q69 **Sir Robert Neill:** That being so, doesn't the success rate of prosecutions depend upon the quality of the evidence?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Q70 **Sir Robert Neill:** And the quality of the investigation, therefore?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Q71 **Sir Robert Neill:** What more is being done to invest in investigation of rape and serious sexual offences, both at the police training and the Crown Prosecution Service level?

The Prime Minister: We are investing about £85 million more into prosecutors for the CPS, specifically to try to give them more heft to get cases done faster and to give victims more confidence.

I chair the crime and justice taskforce and I bring together the Ministers responsible for all of this—from the Lord Chancellor and the Home Secretary to the Minister for Policing and Crime and so on. The CPS, the prosecutors and the police need to work absolutely hand in glove from the outset, rather than constantly passing the buck between each other about who has failed to assemble the requisite evidence or who has left the file



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in the wrong condition. That has basically been one of the problems. We are beefing up the CPS, but also trying to have much greater integration and grip from the police and the CPS together.

Q72 **Sir Robert Neill:** That is a fair observation, but it will require resource to do that, won't it?

The Prime Minister: It will.

Q73 **Sir Robert Neill:** Are you going to make sure that continues to be funded?

The Prime Minister: We are.

Q74 **Sir Robert Neill:** You referred to disclosure and the Liam Allan case. Would you accept that the right to disclosure of unused prosecution material, which may actually assist the defendant or undermine the prosecution's case, is a fundamental safeguard in the system?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do of course agree with that principle, but I think what has happened, sadly, is that a great deal of data and information has been mined from mobile phones, which has produced pain, embarrassment and discomfiture on the part of the victims and has discouraged them from continuing with the case. It has perhaps even deterred people from coming forward. That is why it is vital that we delimit what the police can use in evidence from a mobile phone—restrict it to what is actually germane to the case and make sure that the phone is handed back within 24 hours.

Q75 **Sir Robert Neill:** Would you accept that that could be assisted by further investment in technology for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, to search digital material by artificial intelligence, in the way that happens in serious fraud cases? Would we put the money in for that?

The Prime Minister: I do accept that this is an area where technology has moved very fast. Evidential demands—the demands upon the CPS and the police caused by this huge quantity of data—have been very severe. We need technology, artificial intelligence, to winnow it out and get to what is actually necessary for the prosecution of the case.

Q76 **Sir Robert Neill:** The other great cause of victim attrition is delays in bringing cases to court. That requires courtrooms, lawyers and judges. Will you be reviewing the level of funding made available to the Courts Service and to defence lawyers to ensure that we have good quality lawyers, who can handle these cases in a sensitive fashion on both sides of the case?

The Prime Minister: Yes; I have the utmost esteem for the legal profession, and I am sure they will do an excellent job.

What we are doing to invest in speeding this up is—we have got to try and clear backlogs in courts, as you know—funding 32 more Crown Nightingale courtrooms until the end of March. We have got courtrooms—you talk about technology, and you are quite right. We are equipping courtrooms with cloud video platforms enabling more than 13,000 cases to be heard



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virtually every week, and we have removed the limit on the numbers of days the Crown court can sit, and so forth. We have a new super-courtroom in Manchester, and we are working flat out to bust the backlog.

Q77 Sir Robert Neill: Certainly people are working flat out, and I know the judiciary and lawyers are, but are you also aware that on a number of occasions recently, serious cases have had to be taken out of the list because lawyers were not available either to prosecute or defend them, or because judges were not available? That is because experienced lawyers are leaving the profession because of the low levels of pay.

You have the chance to put that right with Sir Christopher Bellamy's review. Will you commit to funding the results of the Bellamy review into criminal legal aid?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly study the review into legal aid with great care and great interest. We certainly believe that the criminal justice system needs proper funding. We provided £150 million this year for victims and witness support services, getting back to the earlier points I was making, and the spending review gives another half billion to the criminal justice system to help it recover from the pandemic.

Q78 Sir Robert Neill: Thank you. One final thing: another cause of delay is the length of time under which suspects are released under investigation rather than being bailed. That can last for many months and even years. The policing Minister committed in Westminster Hall to reform that. When will we see legislation to reform our RUI and go back to the previous system where you had time limits on bail brought forward?

The Prime Minister: I am certainly very attracted to setting benchmarks, scorecards, for the whole system and that should include, in my view, timing. It should include deadlines. I think that justice delayed is justice denied—also, justice delayed is wildly more expensive.

Q79 Sir Robert Neill: It does require primary legislation to try to reform RUI—

The Prime Minister: I am aware of that.

Q80 Sir Robert Neill: Will that be brought forward?

The Prime Minister: We are discussing it right now.

Chair: Thank you very much to the Chairman of the Justice Committee.

We now move on to the outcome of COP26 and its implementation. We start with the Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, Darren Jones.

Q81 Darren Jones: Thank you, Sir Bernard. Prime Minister, following COP26, will our climate change commitments become firm red lines in future trade deals?

The Prime Minister: Sorry, Darren—our climate change commitments?

Q82 Darren Jones: Will they become firm red lines in future trade deals?



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The Prime Minister: Yes, they are commitments that we will certainly be keeping, and we lead the world. One of the reasons we were able to make, I think, a big positive impact at COP26 was that we stick to these commitments, and we in fact made significant reductions in CO₂. So what we say to our friends and partners is that these matter to us. When it comes to, for instance, Australia—

Q83 **Darren Jones:** On the Australia trade deal, Prime Minister, I asked you on Monday and you did not answer the question. We dropped our climate change commitment in that trade deal in order to get it across the line. Do you regret that?

The Prime Minister: As far as I know—

Q84 **Darren Jones:** No, we did, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Our trade deal with Australia actually includes a substantive chapter on climate change, which reaffirms the commitments of both parties to upholding our obligations under the Paris agreement, including limiting global warming to 1.5°, so I must humbly correct you there. Australia has made a—

Q85 **Darren Jones:** My question is not on Australia's climate change proposals.

The Prime Minister: I am not here as a spokesman for the Australian Government, by the way—

Darren Jones: I understand, which is why I do not want you to answer for them, but answer my questions instead.

The Prime Minister: There was an agreement in our free trade deal about climate change.

Q86 **Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, I am going to move on.

Will you give the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities the power to block decisions such as new coalmines in the UK?

The Prime Minister: These are matters that are already for the relevant planning authority.

Q87 **Darren Jones:** I am asking if after COP26 you will give new powers to the Department to block these things.

The Prime Minister: I think that these are already matters for the relevant planning authority, and I think—

Q88 **Darren Jones:** So nothing will change?

The Prime Minister: I think that what people can see is that this Government leads the world in moving away from coal. What you got at COP26 was quite a remarkable and historic event, as Greenpeace themselves said, because we are moving beyond coal.

Q89 **Darren Jones:** Thank you, Prime Minister. The reason I asked the question is that we are not blocking a new coalmine in the UK, albeit for



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the steel industry. Instead of helping the steel industry move away from coal, we are facilitating a new coalmine. It was cited at COP26 that that undermined what we were trying to deliver there, when there was progress, although not sufficient progress, on coal. Do you not think our actions undermined our ambitions at COP?

The Prime Minister: No, on the contrary. I think what happened was that our actions convinced the world that it could be done, and that what we had in the United Kingdom was an incredible exemplar of a country that used to be 80% dependent on coal for our electricity 50 years ago and is now less than 1% dependent—or 1% or 2% dependent—on coal, and will go to zero. We are going to zero carbon in our whole power-generation system. That is quite an astonishing thing, and people can see that. That was the most powerful argument that we had.

Q90 **Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, we are short on time, so I need to stick to my questions, if that is okay.

The next question is on climate aid. It has been suggested that, in order to meet our climate-aid commitments at COP26, the Foreign Office will need to spend on average £2.3 billion a year, which is an increase of 140% based on previous figures on climate aid. That was not in the Budget from the Chancellor recently. When will the Chancellor update the House on our increased climate-aid commitments?

The Prime Minister: Mr Jones, I do not recognise your figures. The ones I have in my head are that we have committed to £11.6 billion of climate aid, or aid to developing countries to go green. We further said that, when we go back to 0.7%, which the Chancellor's Budget predicts will be by '24-'25, we will have a further £1 billion, so that is a £12.6 billion commitment from the UK around the world. That is an astonishing sum of money. Most people in this country are amazed that we are making such a contribution. We are doing it because we know it is the right thing to do.

Q91 **Darren Jones:** Thank you, Prime Minister; maybe we could confirm the figures in writing afterwards.

It has been reported that you are minded to split up the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to give the COP president, Alok Sharma, his own energy and climate change Department. When I asked the Business Secretary about that yesterday, he disagreed. What is happening?

The Prime Minister: We have no such plans. One of the great things about COP26 was that we brought business and the environment together.

Q92 **Darren Jones:** That's fine. If there are no such plans, that answers my question.

My last question for you, Prime Minister, is about my Committee's inquiry into the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme. We have called for 100% of the profits from that pension scheme to go to the pensioners instead of the Government pocketing 50% of the surplus, as it has done historically.

During the 2019 general election in Mansfield, you said, "I want to tell



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the Mansfield Chad categorically that we will make sure that no Mansfield miner, or any other miner signed up to the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme, is out of pocket. We will make sure that all their cash is fully protected and returned. I have looked into it and we will ensure that's done."

But Prime Minister, you have rejected my Committee's proposals to return those profits to the pensioners. I am not sure why you said to those voters that you had looked into it and would return all their cash, when since then your Government have clearly not done either. Did you mislead those voters in 2019?

The Prime Minister: I can tell you, Mr Jones, that I certainly did not wish to give those voters any false impression about what we were doing.

Q93 **Darren Jones:** But you said specifically that you had looked into it and you would ensure that it would be done. You said it was categorical that that was the case. That suggests that there was some thought behind it—that you had not just mistakenly misled voters. No?

The Prime Minister: I will have to get back to you on my quotation in the Mansfield Chad, and I will write to you as soon as I can.

Chair: Thank you, Prime Minister. We will expect that. We move on to Philip Dunne, Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Q94 **Philip Dunne:** Prime Minister, in your opening remarks to the COP26 conference in Glasgow, you made clear your own personal commitment. I think you said it was the moment when we began "irrefutably to turn the tide and to begin the fightback against climate change". What changes do you think you need to make to the structure of Government to be able to deliver net zero Britain?

The Prime Minister: I think the Government is well structured to deliver net zero in the UK. What we have is a COP president in Alok Sharma who will help to continue to make sure that the world's climate change objectives are delivered.

Alok will work with the incoming Egyptian presidency of COP and the Emiratis, who will run COP28. The real job of work is global: we have to make sure that everybody—all 190-plus countries—stick to the commitments they made, and make COP26 real.

Q95 **Philip Dunne:** So his focus will be on delivering the global commitments. At the moment, he chairs the Climate Action Implementation Committee, which relates entirely to the UK delivery. Will he continue to chair that committee?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Q96 **Philip Dunne:** When did you last chair the Climate Action Strategy Committee, which sits above it?

The Prime Minister: I cannot give you the date, but not very long ago.



Q97 **Philip Dunne:** Would you mind letting us know? When will you chair the next one?

The Prime Minister: We are driving the whole green industrial revolution throughout Government. It is something that I set out in the 10-point plan almost exactly a year ago. We have been leading it from the centre but rely on Departments of State to get on and do it. I pay tribute to Alok, but I also pay tribute to BEIS and Kwasi Kwarteng, who are running with this agenda. Since we produced the 10-point plan, we have seen investment in green technology in this country in the order of £15 billion, and the creation of many thousands of jobs.

Q98 **Philip Dunne:** That is the point, Prime Minister. You have set a strategy, and there is good co-ordination in developing the net zero strategy across Departments at civil service level; the challenge is that at BEIS, only a sixth of activities relate to this agenda, and other Departments are being left more or less to their own devices to deliver, and there is not the kind of oversight that would allow you to ensure they are delivering.

The Prime Minister: That is not true, because—

Philip Dunne: Well, we are behind on the fourth, the fifth and the sixth carbon budget projections for the coming—

The Prime Minister: Yes, but the oversight is being given by me. We are driving the 10-point plan. On CB6, for instance, the only way to do that is to put in the cleaner, greener forms of heating. We are continuing to push on very hard with that. It will be tough, but it can be done. The lesson of clean technology over the last 20 years or so is that, provided Government get behind it and show that they are committed to it, the price will come down. The price of EVs is falling, and the price of wind and solar has fallen very sharply.

Q99 **Philip Dunne:** If the COP President is to continue to chair the implementation committee, that sounds like a good idea, although it is UK-focused and will divert him from his global role, which seems challenging for him. Will you discuss with him the remit, composition and reach of the committee, to make sure it has the necessary powers to deliver across Government? All the evidence we have had before our Committee is that there is a considerable lack of joined-up activity across Government to deliver this agenda. We have multiple Ministers appearing before us, and they regularly say they do not have responsibility for the subject we are talking about.

The Prime Minister: The whole of Government is working to deliver this agenda. You can see the efforts in the results that they are producing. We are securing record sums of investment in green technology; we are reducing our carbon output and we are creating many tens of thousands of jobs.

Q100 **Philip Dunne:** Finally, the UN Secretary-General said in his opening remarks that his intent for the next year is to establish metrics to measure countries' performance in meeting their NDC commitments at



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COP. Are you intending to introduce new metrics and measurements so you are able to measure your own performance, or the Government's performance against their commitments?

The Prime Minister: The measurements are clear for everybody to see. They are there in the reductions of CO₂ that we achieve. One of the things that was achieved in COP26 was an agreement on the Paris rule book, so that everybody has common metrics and dates by which they judge progress.

Q101 **Chair:** To follow up Mr Dunne's machinery of government point, I am quite surprised that you are so happy with the machinery of government. Under covid, I seem to remember you were very frustrated with it and you did not feel it worked, so what has changed? Or are there lessons we have learned from covid that we can implement that will accelerate and give the public confidence that we are going to implement these changes?

The Prime Minister: I did not say I was happy, Sir Bernard. I said that so far as I can see, Departments are working. The beauty of the 10-point plan was that it set out pretty clearly where we need to get to and how to get there. We are also now producing 10 specific road maps for each of the areas—for EVs, carbon capture and storage, or whatever. We are producing for business the things that the Government are doing to make each of the 10 great projects investable, and I think that will help things greatly.

Q102 **Chair:** But covid demonstrated that if you produce real data, engage the public and set up the machinery to drive the process, you can achieve miracles. Isn't that what we need to do with this post-COP agenda?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and that is what we are doing. As you will know, we have a delivery unit under Emily Lawson, with many others working to her, that is chivvying everybody, studying the data in real time and seeing where we are going.

Chair: Thank you. We now move to Neil Parish, Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Q103 **Neil Parish:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I want to talk about the practicalities. We have signed up as one of the countries that will reduce methane by 30%. Much of our red meat—beef and sheep—is produced on permanent pasture, which holds a lot of carbon in the soil. That is a good thing. How do we balance that with reducing our methane? Do we take all the sheep and cattle off the hills—off Exmoor? I do not think you want that, so how do we help farmers get to 30% not just by reducing numbers? Can we bring in new technologies? What can we do to help the farming sector?

The Prime Minister: Well, Mr Parish, I am told that very substantial progress is being made with new technology to reduce the methane emissions from livestock, and I think we should encourage that. I think you can do it without in any way jeopardising the quality of British food—



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British meat. There are breeding techniques, there is diet; there are things that we are looking at.

Q104 **Neil Parish:** There is a Dutch company that is investing in Scotland to produce feed additives that it claims will reduce methane gas emissions from animals by up to 30%. I think there is a lot we can do. Will you commit to helping farming with that new technology as well?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and as you know, in New Zealand, they use seaweed, or they have found that seaweed can be an important additive. We are looking at all that sort of thing.

Q105 **Neil Parish:** Yes, because depending on the type of grass they graze, the more easily they can digest and the less methane gas they give off. I think there is much we can do.

I want to move on to how UK finance is funding deforestation. We have looked into this, and many banks in this country bankroll these big companies in Brazil. Brazil has cut down rainforest the equivalent of twice the size of Devon in the last year alone. Can we do more to strengthen our legislation to stop British financial institutions funding deforestation?

The Prime Minister: Yes, but that is what they all agreed at COP. I think there were about 40 of them: Barclays, Aviva, Schrodgers—I cannot remember, but there were loads of them, a big, long list. What that means is that their account holders, their shareholders and their customers will hold them to account if they continue to finance deforestation. The agreement at COP to halt and reverse deforestation for 90% of the world's forests is underpinned by agreement from financial institutions not to fund it, and also agreement from some of the big grain companies and others—Cargill and so forth—not to use product that comes from deforested land.

Q106 **Neil Parish:** Again, in Brazil, the savannah is being ploughed up to grow soya beans, so all this is still coming in. It is very laudable what has gone on at COP but, Prime Minister, we need to make sure it affects what we buy and that we do not stop agricultural production in this country and import from deforested land. I hope you are determined to make sure that does not happen.

The Prime Minister: No. Of course, Mr Parish, there is no power greater than the power of the consumer. That is what will make the difference. In the end, people will make choices about the firms whose food they buy based on where it comes from. Large numbers of companies at COP signed up not to—

Q107 **Neil Parish:** And that also needs to be recognised in our trade deals, does it not?

The Prime Minister: Well, I certainly think that you can make a lot of progress in these areas on trade deals, and as you know, all the countries concerned that we are doing trade deals with signed up—I think—to the compact on forests.

Q108 **Neil Parish:** Provided that we are not importing that food that is from



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deforestation.

Finally, plastics they are predicted to be a bigger carbon emitter than coal. I think you are dedicated, like I am, to reducing the amount of plastic used. The trouble is that a lot of the Government efforts at the moment are about tackling plastic waste and recycling. That may be laudable, but in the end, if we could actually reduce the amount of plastic we use in the first place, that would be much better. What initiatives do you see? Do you tax some of the original plastics when we make the plastic in the first place? You have to have a method of reducing the amount of plastics being used.

The Prime Minister: Yes, you are completely right that the answer is not recycling. As you know, we are bringing forward measures to stop the export of plastic waste to developing countries, as we said that we would in the manifesto, which I think is right. However, you also have to stop the needless domestic consumption—or production—of plastic stuff. That is why charging for bags in supermarkets has led to a 95% fall in bag use. We are banning stirrers and so on and so forth.

Q109 **Neil Parish:** We just need to get the deposit return schemes going. They have all been delayed. Can you give us assurance, whether it may be bottles or whatever it may be, that we will actually get that also up and running?

The Prime Minister: Yes, but what we also need to do is recognise that the best answer is reduce. Reduce comes before reuse or recycle. Reduce, reduce, reduce. There are alternatives to plastics.

Q110 **Neil Parish:** So we look forward to new Government initiatives.

The Prime Minister: I am thinking of seaweed again. I think seaweed may be one of the keys, Seaweed seems to be the answer for everything, but it is not just seaweed; there are plenty of alternatives.

Chair: Now we have Sarah Champion, Chair of the International Development Committee.

Q111 **Sarah Champion:** Prime Minister, can I take you back to your answer to an earlier question about relationship education? It should have been mandatory in all primary schools in September 2020, but that has not happened. Can I ask you to intervene and make sure it is mandatory, because it is the key to preventing child abuse and violence against women and girls?

The Prime Minister: Let me look into it. I am afraid that it is something that has not really been brought to my attention before. I will look into it. As far as I can remember, it has not been brought to my attention before. I will look into it.

Q112 **Sarah Champion:** Thank you. Can I turn to Afghanistan? I am sure you will agree with me that it is looking like hell on earth over there at the moment. You have the drought, you have the flooding, you have the conflict, you have millions of displaced people, the infrastructure



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collapsing and more than half the country facing starvation over what is going to be a very harsh winter. I really welcome the fact that we are committing to putting more aid, but I wonder if you could speak on how you actually see that being delivered and when.

The Prime Minister: We have doubled aid to £286 million, as you know. We are working as fast as we can to ensure it gets to the people who need it. You are right; the situation is grim. We are—

Q113 **Sarah Champion:** The problem, Prime Minister, is that much of the delivery, particularly of healthcare, was done by women. If we are expecting them to step up and deliver the aid, that is putting them in the face of danger.

The Prime Minister: I appreciate that point. We must make our position clear to the Taliban authorities that we expect them to treat women fairly and equally, as is obviously expressly provided for in the Koran. We must also engage with the Taliban. This is slightly controversial, but I was strongly of the view, when Kabul fell and we had the change of regime, that there was no point in the UK just standing on the sidelines and failing to engage with the Taliban. They may not speak for all Afghans—far from it—but they are some kind of authority in Kabul, even if a very imperfect authority. The UK must try to engage, for the sake of the people you are talking about, if we are to get aid through. That is why we sent Sir Simon Gass out, who did an outstanding job in talking to the Taliban. That does not mean that we necessarily relish the things they have said or done, but we see practical advantage in that for the people of Afghanistan.

Q114 **Sarah Champion:** Thank you. Going back to climate change, how much of the £12.6 billion that you pledged for climate finance will actually be spent on loss and damage?

The Prime Minister: I cannot give you the figure now, but I will write to you. One of the reasons we got an agreement at COP26 was because we had the chapter on loss and damage. I am sure the answer is out there. I will come back to you.

Q115 **Sarah Champion:** Thank you very much. I really welcome that you have signed up to phase out fossil fuel subsidies. Does this mean that you will now also change your policy on supporting fossil fuel projects in low and middle-income countries through UK Export Finance and the money that you give to the Commonwealth Development Corporation?

The Prime Minister: Yes. For middle-income countries and every country that is having difficulty moving past coal, which is loads and loads of participants, the UK has pioneered, with our American and European friends, a new country platform where we set out the portfolio of projects that we want to support but where we want the SMEs, the private sector and the big banks to come in as well. These are projects where people can make a good profit as well as helping to cut CO₂. That is what we are working on.

Q116 **Sarah Champion:** Excellent. The problem at the moment is that the exceptions to that rule are pretty broad. If you could take to look at the



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guidance given to our finance institutes and try to close that, it would be really appreciated. I wonder also how you personally reconcile the new funding to support the global efforts to tackle climate change with the severe cuts to the UK aid programme. I am thinking specifically about the money we give to Bangladesh, which of course is vulnerable to flooding and sea level rises. It will see a 62% cut in our aid in the next year. Ethiopia, where climate change and conflict blight the lives of millions, will see a 55% reduction in UK aid. Is this a situation in which you are giving with one hand but taking away with the other?

The Prime Minister: No, because we are making a massive commitment to climate finance, as you know, which is of great value to those countries. On ODA generally, in spite of the temporary reduction to 0.5% because of the pandemic and the exceptional pressures that we face, we are still spending £10 billion in ODA in 2021. That means that we are the third largest ODA donor in the G7 as a percentage of GNI.

Q117 **Sarah Champion:** We are the only G7 country that has cut our funding, though, aren't we?

The Prime Minister: And the percentage goes back up, as you know, by 2024-25. I think most people in this country can see what a huge sum of money we are giving to the world, and they think that is right, but they also accept that in the grip of a pandemic, when we had to spend £407 billion to look after people in this country, it was right to adjust things.

Q118 **Sarah Champion:** I understand that, but I think the problem is that the immediate pressing issues are not being funded and yet we are seen to be dangling money for climate finance in the future. I wonder how you reconcile those two things together in your own mind.

The Prime Minister: We are funding as much as we can of the pressing issues—£10 billion is a lot. We are investing more in, for instance, girls' education, and we pledged another £430 billion—£430 million, I should say—for the Global Partnership for Education over the next five years.

Sarah Champion: Thank you, Prime Minister. You have, though, cut £183 million to girls' education this year.

Q119 **Chair:** Please can we not forget the very important funding for securing women's rights to control over their fertility so that we can help support population control in developing countries? That seems to me a very important part—

The Prime Minister: It is. And education, if I may say so, is the prior—

Q120 **Chair:** Yes, but education without access to contraception is not worth nearly as much, is it?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I agree with that.

Chair: Thank you. We will now move on to the Budget and spending block of questions. I am sorry that we are going to detain you a little longer, Prime Minister, but I am pleased to say that we are not that far behind, despite everyone going over time.



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Q121 **Mel Stride:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Good afternoon, Mel—Mr Stride.

Q122 **Mel Stride:** In March, you told the Committee, “I strongly believe in a low-tax Government, and I am a low-tax Conservative.” How do you square that with the fact that your latest spending commitments around the Budget and the comprehensive spending review have led the OBR to forecast that the UK’s tax burden will rise to its highest level since the Government of Clement Attlee post-war?

The Prime Minister: For the very simple reason that the country has been through the biggest fall in output not just since the second world war but before the second world war—it is the biggest that I can see for a very, very long time—and we had to look after people throughout the pandemic. We had to spend upwards of £407 billion on schemes to keep businesses going, to put bread on family tables and to look after everybody in the country. I think that everybody understood the huge fiscal impact of that.

Q123 **Mel Stride:** I certainly accept that we had to spend a great deal of money, but a big choice was made at the time of the Budget, particularly with the forecast having improved from March, as to what the Chancellor did with that extra fiscal space. He had a number of choices, and two of those were: did he spend more or did he relieve the pressure on tax increases? The decision seems to have been taken that he would spend an awful lot more. In fact, in the Budget he trumpeted an increase in public expenditure greater than any Government this century—I think that is how he put it. Are you comfortable with that? How does that square with your ambition, by the end of this Parliament, of getting taxes down?

The Prime Minister: What the Chancellor also did was cut taxes for the low paid very considerably by—

Mel Stride: But overall the tax burden is going to rise, isn’t it?

The Prime Minister: —about £1,200 for a single mum or a single parent on universal credit.

Q124 **Mel Stride:** But, Prime Minister, in the round, the tax burden is going to go up very considerably. We have had huge corporation tax increases, a freezing of the thresholds of income tax—

The Prime Minister: Yes, I accept—

Q125 **Mel Stride:** These are huge, broadly based tax increases. I am interested in how you think we are going to get those taxes down, given all the spending that is going on.

The Prime Minister: First of all, unemployment is much lower than forecast. People said it would be 12%; it is now actually running at levels we saw before the pandemic. It is quite an extraordinary thing. Unemployment is a very expensive as well as a very wasteful and hateful



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thing. We are also seeing faster growth than many people forecast. We have the fastest growth forecast—

Q126 **Mel Stride:** But the OBR's forecast on growth going forward is fairly anaemic, once—

The Prime Minister: We have the fastest growth forecast of the G7 next year.

What I believe the Chancellor's strategy is, and it is one I certainly support, is to ensure that Britain—the UK—takes the steps now to deal with the debt we built up, to deal with the fiscal impact of covid, but also to make the long-term investment we need to drive up productivity and get growth out of the economy. If you want the big economic strategy, for decades this country has underperformed in productivity and—

Q127 **Mel Stride:** May I ask about productivity, as you have mentioned it, Prime Minister? You have urged at various points that companies should pay their workers more. Do you accept that if wages go up and productivity does not—the OBR suggests it will not move very much in the coming years—that just leads to inflation? Are you concerned about inflation and the impact it could have on the public finances?

The Prime Minister: You always have to watch inflation. The numbers today speak to the price of energy, the difficulties in global supply chains, and an economy coming out of covid, but I would rather have a situation now where there is big demand for labour and an economy recovering strongly where people want employees than a situation like those in the '80s and the '90s, which you and I remember well, when millions of people unfairly and unnecessarily had their talents wasted because of unemployment. That is far crueller.

You are quite right in your point about wages without comparable productivity gains—

Mel Stride: This is a critical point.

The Prime Minister: —but that is why we need to invest now in the other ingredients that drive productivity, such as skills, training, infrastructure and making sure that people are able to live nearer their place of work.

Q128 **Mel Stride:** That is right, but that will take time. If that investment is made, it will not happen overnight; we are not going to see productivity suddenly spike up in the next year or two as a consequence of that. Is not the danger that by talking up wages as we are at the moment, with inflation so high and knowing that productivity is low and has been since the financial crisis of 2007, we will push inflation still further? We could end up in a wage-price spiral that will have devastating consequences for the public finances. Do you think that the Government may need to be a bit more thoughtful when it comes to urging employers to constantly put up wages without commensurate increases in productivity?



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The Prime Minister: If I may say so, I think you are slightly overegging what the Government have been doing. As it happens, I think people should be paid fairly for what they do, and I think it is right that the living wage has gone up, but wages and prices are not for the Government to set; they are for the market to agree.

Q129 **Mel Stride:** But they do condition the expectation in the labour market of where wages might be going every time the Government say, "Come on, everybody's got to have a pay rise," but there is no productivity improvement to go with it.

The Prime Minister: I think you are ascribing too much power. I think it was the Emperor Diocletian who tried that; it did not work.

Mel Stride: That is an essay question we will know the answer to in time, Prime Minister.

Chair: We come to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, Stephen Timms.

Q130 **Stephen Timms:** Thank you, Sir Bernard. Prime Minister, I welcome the additional funding for universal credit in the Budget, but should not some of that have been directed towards people who are not working? Almost a quarter of people who claim universal credit are not required to look for work, because of their health problems or because they are caring for young children. They all lost the £20 a week uplift, and they are facing the big price rises we know about. Shouldn't some of the help have been provided for them?

The Prime Minister: I understand completely why you say that, but to go back to what I was saying to Mel Stride, what we are trying to do now is encourage people into work. The situation at the moment is we have, in some places, a serious labour shortage; therefore, the incentive should be to get people into better paid work, which is why I think the Chancellor was absolutely right to cut the taper relief on universal credit, so as to make work pay more for those on UC.

For those who are not in work on UC, I understand your point perfectly, Mr Timms. They are people we must look after in any event, but for them, there are other interventions that we have, such as the £500 million for local councils, the energy price caps, the freezing of fuel duty, the winter fuel allowance, cold weather payments, support for the cost of childcare and so on. You and I have talked many times about people with no recourse to public funds. Even they have those types of support.

Q131 **Stephen Timms:** Do you agree—I think you will—that social security should provide an adequate safety net for families?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. This is a very important point: of course I do, but the best thing for those families is to help at least one member of that family into work. That is why I think what we were doing with universal credit was right.

Q132 **Stephen Timms:** But our Committee has heard from parents, for



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example, who will have to skip meals in order to make sure that their children do not have to skip meals because of the £20-a-week reduction. That should not be happening, should it? Shouldn't the social security safety net avoid that from happening?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it does.

Q133 **Stephen Timms:** My point is that it does not. Certainly, the evidence to our Committee is that parents are having to skip meals at the moment.

The Prime Minister: We are doing everything we can to support people in those circumstances, with the £0.5 billion household support fund and the £200 million holiday activities and food programme for families who are in particular hardship. I know how hard it can be for some families, but we are putting money into supporting those families. It is also important to stress the value of work as the way forward.

Q134 **Stephen Timms:** The headline rate of benefit at the moment is the lowest it has been in real terms for over 30 years. In those 30 years, the economy has grown by more than a half in real terms, and yet support for unemployed families has not gone up at all in that time. That does not seem right, does it?

The Prime Minister: I will have to study those figures. The welfare budget, as you know, because you are a great authority on this, is still extremely big.

Q135 **Stephen Timms:** Finally, let me quote to you a statistic from the House of Commons Library, which says that if you compare the level of unemployment support today with average earnings, it is less than it was when Lloyd George introduced unemployment benefit 110 years ago. Something is going seriously wrong there.

The Prime Minister: Can I just repeat my point? We are in a situation now where there is a massive demand for labour. We want to encourage people through the benefit system into work. That is why it is structured in the way that it is.

Q136 **Stephen Timms:** But you want them to be able to afford meals, though.

The Prime Minister: Of course, that is why we have the protections that we have.

Q137 **Stephen Timms:** A final point, on a different topic. At our meeting in July, you kindly undertook to look at the Online Safety Bill, which we have already discussed this afternoon. One of its key objectives is to tackle online fraud. I know you have had a letter today from Martin Lewis, Sir Richard Branson, Dawn French and others, who have all appeared in online scam adverts, calling on you, as we talked about in July, to regulate online advertising in the Online Safety Bill. Have you been able to make any headway in looking at that point?

The Prime Minister: Thank you. I haven't seen the letter from the people you mention. We are certainly very concerned about online scams



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and online ads of any kind. I know that we are looking at this. Again, I refer you to what we are doing in the online harms Bill.

Q138 **Stephen Timms:** At the moment, the Bill isn't proposed to regulate paid-for advertising. You made the point in July that you would have a look at that. Perhaps you could drop us a line on that.

The Prime Minister: Let me see what I can find out about that, Mr Timms. As I understand it, at the moment the view is that the Bill cannot deal with every ill caused by the internet. It may be that that is one thing it is failing to do—one of many things it is failing to do—but I will get back to you.

Chair: Thank you, Mr Timms. Tobias Ellwood?

Q139 **Mr Ellwood:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Prime Minister. We have had two terrorist attacks in the UK this last month. It is now two decades since 9/11, and extremism is now on the rise—no doubt spurred by events in Afghanistan. The internet is now more powerful than the pulpit in the mosque. Should we be doing more to tackle online radicalisation?

The Prime Minister: There is always much more we should do to tackle radicalisation—online or otherwise. When you look at some of the cases we have seen recently, it is clear that people are increasingly adept at using devices to conceal their internet history as they radicalise themselves. We need to be wise to that. We also need to be much more ruthless in joining the dots together. So often with characters who cause or are responsible for terrorist attacks or whatever, there will be things in their past that are signals or indicators of a likelihood that they will do this. Each signal or indicator individually may not be enough to trigger our concerns, but we need to bring them together.

Q140 **Mr Ellwood:** I welcome that, but I am also interested in what is online, and whether you think that more responsibility should be taken by online organisations. I hope you would lean into this.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do.

Q141 **Mr Ellwood:** Can I move on? Last time we met here you agreed that the world is becoming more unstable and more complex. There is an increase in political warfare, along with a rise in extremism, as we have just discussed, and authoritarianism. We now see examples of that playing out in eastern Europe. Can I ask what military assistance we can offer both Poland and, indeed, Ukraine to show Russia that we are serious about deterring any kinetic action?

The Prime Minister: The two cases are very different, as you know, because Poland has a NATO security guarantee. Under article 5 we are committed to the defence of Poland, which you know. Ukraine, sadly, for historical reasons does not have the same guarantee from NATO powers. Ukraine does not even have a membership action plan. What we have got to do is make sure that everybody understands that the cost of miscalculation on the borders of both Ukraine and Poland would be enormous. I am sure you and colleagues around this room would agree



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with my impression, having been to Ukraine several times and met people there, that it would be a tragic mistake for the Kremlin to think there was anything to be gained by military adventurism.

Q142 Mr Ellwood: Okay, but I put it to you that the only way we are going to deter potentially Russia from amassing troops on the border with Ukraine and venturing into the Donbass region is by us saying now exactly what the consequences would be. I invite you to take that away with you.

COP26 has helped to illustrate just how fragile our planet is, but our turnaround to repair this damage is measured in decades—carbon neutral by 2050. This means that globally we must now brace ourselves for profound changes to our way of life over the next decade. Crop failures leading to mass food shortages and lands becoming too hot to live in will all lead to mass migration on biblical scales. That will test Governments across the world, particularly in Africa. Does the Prime Minister agree with David Attenborough, who said, “Make no mistake, climate change is the biggest threat to security that modern humans have ever faced.”?

The Prime Minister: I think he is right in that. Actually, I made a speech to the UN Security Council saying substantially the same thing.

Q143 Mr Ellwood: Thank you. Bringing those two things together, page 40 of the Red Book confirms that defence spending is set to fall over the next four years. The current budget has been stretched by the requirement to cover the cyber and space domains at the expense of the traditional services, so tanks, ships, planes and troop numbers are all now being cut. Would you agree, Prime Minister, that the integrated review is arguably out of date, and that we now need to look seriously at defence spending being increased to 3%?

The Prime Minister: No. I know you are a great authority on these matters, Mr Ellwood, but I must respectfully dissent from you when you say that the integrated review is out of date, because I think what would be out of date would be to—first of all, we are spending record sums on defence: £24 billion to reform and renew our armed forces, 2.4%—

Q144 Mr Ellwood: I know the numbers. You know that I know them well.

The Prime Minister: But what I am saying to you is that I disagree with you profoundly.

Q145 Mr Ellwood: This is a peacetime budget, and we have just confirmed that the threats are growing, and therefore we cannot manage. The budget is being reduced by 0.4%: I have it here in front of me in the Red Book. The point I am trying to make is that I am simply inviting you to recognise the growing threats that are coming over the horizon, and asking you to please recognise and reconsider where the integrated review now is and what we need to prepare for.

The Prime Minister: If you are saying, Mr Ellwood, that you think we should go back and prepare for tank battles in—

Mr Ellwood: No, you are putting words into my mouth.



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The Prime Minister: Well, you mentioned threats on European—

Q146 **Mr Ellwood:** You mentioned tanks. We are cutting back on our tanks. What is advancing on the Ukrainian border? It is tanks, arguably enough, but that is besides the point. I am saying step back, look at the wider security picture, look at our defence posture, and see what needs to be done.

The Prime Minister: If you think that UK tanks are the answer—if you are saying that we should commit UK tanks to the defence of Ukraine—

Mr Ellwood: I am really sorry that you are taking us down this rabbit hole, because you know perfectly well that it is not about tanks.

The Prime Minister: I am not taking you down a rabbit hole.

Mr Ellwood: Tanks are one element of a wide spectrum of our defence capability.

The Prime Minister: You brought up tanks, Mr Ellwood.

Q147 **Mr Ellwood:** Tanks, aircraft—48 aircraft, F-35s. You promised 138; you have cut back to 48. You have not just cut back on tanks: Warriors have been removed completely, Hercules aircraft have been removed completely, and then 10,000 troops have been removed. We can talk about tanks, or we can talk about the wider spectrum of capabilities that have been reduced, at the very time—I am trying to make this clear—that there are bigger threats coming over the horizon.

Chair: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Yes, and what I am trying to make clear is that I think it is now or never for the UK armed forces.

Q148 **Mr Ellwood:** Now or never?

The Prime Minister: We have to recognise that the old concepts of fighting big tank battles on the European landmass, which I think is what you are driving at, are over, and there are other, better things that we should be investing in: in the FCAS—the future combat air system—and in cyber. This is how warfare in the future is going to be fought. We should be investing in our advanced early warning systems; that is where we need to be. I think that the investments we are making in new technology—

Q149 **Mr Ellwood:** You cannot hold ground with cyber.

Chair: Order.

The Prime Minister:—are absolutely indispensable to our ability to fight the wars of the 21st century.

Mr Ellwood: I do not doubt that. I do not disagree with that.

The Prime Minister: And I do not think that going back to a 1940s-style approach will serve us well.



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Chair: Mr MacNeil, Trade Committee Chair.

Q150 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Prime Minister, as we all know, you were an advocate of Brexit. You are now an advocate of trade deals, which I think we both agree in the circumstances are a good thing, given where we are. Your Government figures say that Brexit will cost something like 4.9% of GDP; the OBR says 4% of GDP, and we can correspond that—for ease of understanding—to £490 or £400. The question I want to ask you is this: what will you recoup in the trade deals that you are now an advocate of—with New Zealand, for instance? How much will you recoup, either in percentages or pounds, and with Australia, what will you recoup?

The Prime Minister: I think that both deals will give opportunities to—

Q151 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Numbers.

The Prime Minister: I can't give you numbers.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Luckily I am here, because I can.

The Prime Minister: It depends how much the Australians and the New Zealanders decide to buy.

Q152 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Well, you have—

Chair: Order. Let the Prime Minister answer the question.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Sir Bernard. What we do have is a big opportunity for Scottish beef, for Scottish whisky—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: This is waffle. Come on.

The Prime Minister: It is not. These industries—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The numbers you are looking for—

Chair: Order. Let the Prime Minister answer the question, and then I will come back to you.

Q153 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** With respect, Mr Chairman, he is waffling. I am looking for numbers; he hasn't got numbers, so I am—

The Prime Minister: The UK deal alone could increase exports by about £100 million. Quite a lot of that will be Scotch whisky.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Slainte.

The Prime Minister: Are you turning up your nose at that? Are you against it? The SNP are against every free trade deal that is ever done.

Q154 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** No, that's nothing to do with it. You should have listened to the question.

The Prime Minister: Never let it be forgotten that they were against joining the EU.



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Q155 Angus Brendan MacNeil: Stop heckling yourself, Prime Minister. The answer is that for the £490 that Brexit cost, an Australian trade deal would take back £2 and a New Zealand trade deal would take back £1. So you are still £487 out of pocket. That is the deal that you have landed the British people. That is why you have the problems you have.

You are in a pickle with Ireland, as well you know—it is probably known as the British problem in Ireland. Is Ireland being independent a nuisance to you, Prime Minister? I sometimes wonder if you wish it had never become independent and richer per capita than the UK. Or are you quite happy that it has? What is your relationship with Ireland at the moment, given the threat of the protocol and your triggering of 16?

The Prime Minister: We have terrific relations with Dublin—I think they are just about our biggest trading partner.

Q156 Angus Brendan MacNeil: Fantastic. At least you didn't quibble with their being independent and in the EU, as some of wider-eyed Brexiteers do. Moving on, do you think that you, Sir Kier Starmer and Sir Ed Davey should stop sending big-value donors to the House of Lords, commonly known as cash for honours? It is seen as a very corrupt practice internationally.

The Prime Minister: Didn't you raise that with me earlier on today?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Yes; it was actually my colleague, Jonathan Edwards, and I happened to be sitting beside him.

The Prime Minister: That's right; I saw you jumping up and down. I think the answer—

Q157 Angus Brendan MacNeil: Should the practice end?

The Prime Minister: The answer to that is that these are, by and large, men and women who have contributed a huge amount to public life—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: At £3 million?

The Prime Minister: Until you get rid of the system by which the trades union barons fund other parties or you have a completely taxpayer-funded system of politics, we need to continue with the system by which public-spirited people give donations.

Q158 Angus Brendan MacNeil: But find themselves in the House of Lords. This is selling peerages.

The Prime Minister: The people you are talking about have done acts of great public service for a long time.

Q159 Angus Brendan MacNeil: You say you believe in levelling up. When will you level up the electricity market? It is working against many parts of Scotland. Green energy could be produced on Scotland's islands, but due to the structures of your Government it costs far more to take green energy to the main UK market than to buy it from the equivalent distance in the continental market. If you believe in levelling up, the transmission



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and distribution costs need to be equalised for fairness—not just that, but for climate targets to be met. Scotland’s islands could have interconnectors, so the right CfD levels were given, making us less reliant on European producers.

The Prime Minister: There is an issue about the cost of transmission, and you are right to raise it. We are looking at it.

Q160 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Okay, thank you for that. Last point I want to raise with you: when we spoke in this forum, happily, 14 months ago—let’s see if you recall it—I asked you who would be responsible in the UK for empty supermarket shelves. You said, “It is certainly going to be me and the Government.” Do you stand by that still?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do.

Q161 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Oh, you’re responsible for the empty supermarket shelves?

The Prime Minister: It depends what you mean by responsible. We are responsible for trying to help improve supply chains, and that is now starting to happen. But the responsibility for the problem is one that is caused by a great many global factors. If you are talking about HGV drivers, there are shortages of HGV drivers around the world.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I raised them.

The Prime Minister: You did—I remember. There are shortages of HGV drivers in the United States, China and across the world. What we are doing now is trying to accelerate the—

Q162 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Do you think Brexit has made it worse?

The Prime Minister: No, I think that it’s a pan-European problem. What we want to see is people in this country wanting to become HGV drivers, because it is a well-paid, highly skilled job.

Q163 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Are you going to change job?

The Prime Minister: With good conditions. Sometimes, frankly, the conditions have not been very attractive, least of all for women.

Chair: Prime Minister, if you want me to renew my HGV class 1 licence, I am standing by.

Q164 **Jeremy Hunt:** Prime Minister, there is no one after me, so you can relax and take your time. I have just got two topics, and I am sure we can get through them briefly. The first one is about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. As you know, her husband Richard just completed 21 days of hunger strike. The Iranians have often linked her detention, and that of Anoosheh Ashoori, Morad Tahbaz and Mehran Raoof, to repayment of a historical debt. Can I just confirm with you that, as an independent sovereign country, the decision to repay that debt is our decision, and that no other country—certainly not the United States—has any veto over the decision to repay that debt?



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The Prime Minister: Jeremy—Mr Hunt—you will be familiar with the complexities of this sad, sad case from your own time in the Foreign Office, and you will know how difficult it has been to resolve. But what I can tell you is that we continue to work with the Iranians and, of course, other partners around the world, including the Americans, who have similar problems of dual nationals in detention in Iran. Am I happy with the way things are at the moment? No. Should we be able to sort it out immediately with a snap of the fingers by repaying the IMS obligations? Yes, in an ideal world that would be terrific but, as you know from your own experience, it is more complicated than that.

Q165 **Jeremy Hunt:** I do understand that, and I understand that there are sanctions. Yesterday, Jeremy Wright, former Attorney General, said that, because the debt pre-dates the sanctions, there is a legitimate argument that it would be okay to pay it. But if you cannot use a bank to repay it, for various reasons, why can't we do what President Obama did in January 2016, and fly over a crate of cash to Tehran and just repay that debt?

The Prime Minister: Well, it's certainly worth considering; but as you know, there are complexities attached.

Jeremy Hunt: I do understand that.

The Prime Minister: I think it is also important to recognise that there are other UK-Iranian dual nationals in addition to Nazanin, who form a part of the equation, and we have to be very sensitive to their needs as well.

Q166 **Jeremy Hunt:** I absolutely understand that. But there is one thing that you could say to all of them that would give them great comfort, which is that their fate will not in any way be linked by the UK to the outcome of the JCPOA talks in Vienna; that they will not be used as pawns to put pressure on the Iranians.

The Prime Minister: No.

Q167 **Jeremy Hunt:** The last thing I wanted to say is that Nazanin herself is under house arrest effectively, but she can see TV clips. Have you got a message to her about the five and a half years that it has taken, and whether she can get home for Christmas?

The Prime Minister: I want to say to Nazanin—she and I have been in touch, as I am sure she was in touch with you when you were Foreign Secretary—that I continue to be horrified by the ordeal she has been through. I have nothing but admiration for the way in which she has dealt with it. It has been unbearable to witness, and I know how much she wants to come home and to see her family—to see Richard and to see her daughter—and be able to come back to this country.

I can tell you that we are working as hard as we can to ensure that we deliver that. It is not easy. If I could tell Nazanin now that we'd have her home for Christmas, I certainly would. It breaks my heart that I can't make that promise, but we will continue to do what we can.



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Q168 **Jeremy Hunt:** Thank you. The second area from me is completely different. It is NHS staffing. We know that in the pandemic we recruited 5,500 more doctors, 10,000 more nurses, which is very welcome. But we also know that there are 93,000 vacancies in the NHS, with shortages in every single specialty. Sir Bernard, I and five other Select Committee Chairs have put down an amendment to the Health and Care Bill asking for independent estimates to be published every couple of years as to how many doctors and nurses we should be training. Will the Government support that amendment?

The Prime Minister: I am very interested in what you are saying, and very interested in the amendment, but we have our own targets and ambitions as Government, as you know. We want another 50,000 more nurses and we are on track to deliver that by the end of the Parliament. There is now a record number of healthcare professionals in the NHS—more than ever before. We are working as hard as we can to get more GPs, which was raised earlier with me in the House, and to get more radiographers. We are short in many key areas. Whether our campaign would be helped by the measures that you propose, I can't say, but we are very happy to study them.

Q169 **Jeremy Hunt:** Just to be clear, we are not asking for any new targets, just for independent estimates of the numbers that we should be training, given that it takes seven years to train a doctor. Can I ask you to put yourself in the shoes of a doctor or nurse on the frontline? The Royal Colleges, just to give you the exact numbers, who are by no means political extremists—they are very reasonable—they have calculated that we need 500 more obstetricians, 1,400 more anaesthetists, 1,900 more radiologists, 2,000 more midwives, 2,000 more A&E consultants, 2,500 more GPs and 39,000 nurses today. Why would you not want to give those people on the frontline the encouragement, if we cannot solve the problem right away, that we are at least training enough for the future?

The Prime Minister: I am not ruling your idea out, Jeremy. All I am saying is that we have set some pretty ambitious targets already. We have record numbers in the NHS. We will look at your idea.

Jeremy Hunt: Thank you. Last one, Sir Bernard.

Chair: Very briefly.

Q170 **Jeremy Hunt:** Very briefly, yes. All that training is funded by Health Education England, but even after the spending review, it still has not been given its budget. Can you promise, with all these desperate staff shortages, that it will not be cut in real terms?

The Prime Minister: The Budget and the spending review, if you look at the health and social care—

Jeremy Hunt: But the bit of it that is on training has not been settled.

The Prime Minister—add another £36 billion on top of the extra £92 billion that we put into frontline healthcare, on top of the £33 billion that we put in two years ago when we came in. I am sure that there is, within



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the NHS budget—there must be funds for health education, but I will look at what you say.

Jeremy Hunt: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you, Prime Minister. You have been generous with your time with us today and generous that you have given us the three sessions this year, on top of the delayed session in January.

The Prime Minister: This is the fourth session.

Chair: It is the fourth session; I suppose you are right. Thank you for that. We will see you next year.