

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Defending Global Britain, HC 166

Tuesday 30 November 2021

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Sarah Atherton; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 321-392

Witnesses

I: Sir Stephen Lovegrove, National Security Adviser.



Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Stephen Lovegrove.

Q321 **Chair:** Welcome to this Defence Committee hearing on Tuesday 30 November 2021. We are happy to welcome to Sir Stephen Lovegrove, who is National Security Adviser and also, as is pertinent to our discussions today, a former permanent secretary to the Ministry of Defence. A little minion tells me that it is your birthday today, sir.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It is.

Chair: I wish you happy birthday and thank you for being here today. You are more than welcome.

As you know, we are going to focus on the national security strategy and the defence posture in relation to the Integrated Review, but before we go into the details, could you please give the Committee an update on what has happened to the F-35? We have seen dramatic pictures on social media of it going over the end of the Queen Elizabeth. Thankfully, the pilot is, we understand, safe and well, but there are all sorts of suggestions that the engine coverings were left on. We would be grateful if you could update us on whether the F-35 has been located and when it will be retrieved.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes, that is absolutely correct. A British F-35 pilot ejected during routine flying operations in the Med. I have not seen the footage you speak about, but I understand there is no reason to believe that it is not genuine. The pilot was recovered safely to the Queen Elizabeth, and he is still undergoing medical checks, but we are hopeful that he will be absolutely fine.

It would be premature of me to comment on the reasons for the accident. I am aware of the speculation you mentioned, but the recovery of the flight data recorder and the wreckage are really vital for an accurate investigation to determine the causes of the crash. Clearly, the swift recovery of the aircraft is what we would like, and we are working closely with allies on the mechanics of that, but I can't go into too much detail about it, for reasons of operational security. We have not got the plane up yet. Investigations are certainly ongoing into the incident.

HMS Queen Elizabeth continues with her operational task, and the F-35s continue to fly on the carrier, so this has not impeded the basic mission, but nobody is underestimating the seriousness of the incident, and we will be looking into it as quickly as we humanly can. That is as far as I can go at the moment, I am afraid, Chair.

Q322 **Chair:** Thank you for that. I have a final point on this, if I may. The Queen Elizabeth has left the scene where the wreckage has been identified, although I think another ship has been left behind.



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Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think that is right.

Chair: Russia has some of the world's state-of-the-art underwater capability to monitor wreckages and map activity underwater. Is it a concern of yours that the Russians are in the vicinity and looking for the F-35 as well?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We are aware of Russian undersea capabilities, and you are quite right to identify them as being state of the art. The kinds of precautions and operations that we are undertaking at the moment are designed, at least in part, to ensure that the technology of the F-35 remains as confidential as you would like it to be. Those security aspects are very much at the top of our mind.

Chair: Thank you. We want to move on, but Mark wants to quickly come in.

Q323 **Mr Francois:** Sir Stephen, happy birthday. Very quickly, you said we have not raised the aircraft yet. Have you found the aircraft?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: My understanding is that the experts know where the aircraft is, yes.

Q324 **Mr Francois:** We have located it; we just haven't got it to the surface.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes, I believe so.

Mr Francois: Right. Thank you.

Chair: Stuart Anderson, let's turn to threats, please.

Q325 **Stuart Anderson:** Happy birthday, Sir Stephen. Talking about the Russian capability leads nicely on to my first question. Would it be fair to say that the Government views the current security threat as Russia, and the future security threat as China?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think it would be a little more complex than that. The Integrated Review broadly described Russia as the most acute threat that we face at the moment, and China not as a chronic threat but certainly as the major long-term challenge. That probably bears a bit of unpacking.

I do not myself believe that Russia is likely to go away in the way that acute threats sometimes do. It is a great and enormous country, and it will continue to pose us all manner of challenges for the foreseeable future. Likewise, while there is much of China's behaviour that we do take exception to—most notably human rights abuses, their behaviour in the South China sea and the various threats they may pose to open societies around the world—the Prime Minister has equally been very clear that he would like, and does welcome, responsible investment from China. He recognises that China's rise is a fact of 21st-century life, and that we want to be able to take advantage of that, to the extent that we can do so safely. So both things require a bit of nuancing.



The other thing I would say is that there are other threats that we have to be intensely alive to. Proliferation is an enormous threat at the moment. We are seeing evidence of CBT—that is chemical and biological—proliferation. Clearly, new weapons systems are being developed all the time, and they are not necessarily always the preserve of Russia or China. Terrorism has not gone away, as we have tragically seen over the last few weeks, so there is plenty to occupy us in the national security sphere at the moment. That was a long answer, but—

Q326 Stuart Anderson: It was very good, and you raise a good point about the CBT threat. I recently got back from a trip to the High North looking at the increase of Russian capability, particularly in missiles in the Kola peninsula, which is reaching a stage where it exceeds that of the cold war period. You said that is an acute threat; is it a major concern, particularly the nuclear capability they are developing up there at the moment?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We do very, very seriously regret and oppose the development of the new weapons systems that Russia is undertaking at the moment. Nuclear-powered and nuclear-tipped cruise missiles, nuclear-tipped torpedoes—these are all things that President Putin has talked about and that we abhor. As you know, we maintain a minimum credible deterrent posture, and we would like more countries to do the same. There is no question but that an age of proliferation is dawning, and it is occupying a lot of our time.

Q327 Stuart Anderson: It is good that you would like more allies to think in the same way as we do. Which of them currently do and share our concerns, particularly about Russia and the future you describe with China?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Nearly all of our closest allies are aware of the kinds of development that you are talking about. Of our two nuclear allies—America and France—both are intensely aware of the threats posed by Russia and its armed forces, which have been recapitalised very substantially in the last 10 years or so. Some of that is coming through in, for instance, the nuclear posture review, which the President of the United States aims to publish at the beginning of next year. Obviously, as a proportion of the attention compared with 10 or 15 years ago, in America more is being directed toward China. That is self-evidently true, but that is not to say that Russia has dropped off the radar. People are following this stuff very closely, just as we are following the developments on the Ukrainian border very closely.

Q328 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Happy birthday, Stephen. May we take the China issue slightly further? It is noted that China has created an economic debt trap situation across many parts of the developing world—rather than a sphere of influence, it is a sphere of debt. And we have the head of MI6 talking today—at last—about data traps and the dangers they pose, not only for the developing world but for the so-called developed world and their understanding of utilising AI and other technologies. Looking at that, I wonder how the Government balance the increased economic engagement with China on the back of the debt trap,



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and now the data trap, with trying to maintain some notion of human rights and promoting democracy. It seems very confusing. In its report last year, the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee said that the Government requires a more coherent single strategy on China, for all those reasons.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes, I understand the question. In some ways, this is a question that faces all nations at the moment. For instance, it is instructive that America has obviously shifted its attention more clearly to China, and it has, on a number of occasions, called out China—both the current Administration and the previous one—but in that period it has increased its trade with China by over 40%. It is an inescapable fact that China is a superpower. Its economic growth will almost certainly continue, and to some extent world economic growth depends on it doing so. The issue is balancing that with the absolutely real peril associated with debt traps. An example of that arose the other day: the new Ugandan international airport was paid for by China; the Ugandans realised they were not capable of paying for it, so they went back to renegotiate the terms and they were not allowed to do so. That is a pretty pernicious and irresponsible way to behave on the part of China.

Likewise, the hoovering up of data needs to be thought about very carefully, because there will in due course be technologies that are capable of taking advantage of that data. It may well be just sitting there, relatively passive, at the moment, but that is unlikely to be the case for good.

Q329 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** The concern for many is that that type of technology is already being utilised by private companies; now it is going to be utilised by states like communist China. That is the concern. It is already there.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I suspect it is already being used by states like communist China to the same extent as it is being used by the private companies. I am really thinking about when quantum technology becomes real, when artificial intelligence has moved on in leaps and bounds; then, having all that data, I am reliably informed—I am no technologist—will give considerable advantage to the owners, whether or not they came by it lawfully.

Charting the course between recognising those threats and recognising the reality of China's importance on the world stage is sort of the defining question. I was in charge of the energy Department in 2015 and was responsible for negotiating the deal on Hinkley Point C on behalf of the then Administration. We have moved a very long way from that golden era, those days when the default was that Chinese investment was a good thing in pretty much all areas—not all areas, but very much more than today. We have moved to a place where we are much, much more thoughtful about where the investment should come from and what the trade relationships should look like. The new National Security and Investment Bill will give teeth to that, but there will continue to be any number of very hard cases thrown up by hostile state actions, human



rights abuses, statements, and hostile economic diplomacy of the type you mentioned. We should not be remotely complacent about that. We are investing more in people to deal with those cases on a case-by-case basis, but we will have to see whether we have invested enough.

Q330 Chair: I have two quick questions, one on China and one on Russia. China has a clear strategy of interpreting our international rules-based order for its own benefit. As you touched on, it is advancing its One Belt, One Road programme. It is ensnaring more and more countries into its way of thinking. Barbados is the latest country that we have lost influence and friendship with, but you could add Laos, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Congo, Chad, Zambia, Mozambique, Niger, Cambodia, Antigua and Barbuda, Sri Lanka and Kenya. Even Italy is now signed up to the One Belt, One Road programmes. All those countries are now more influenced by China and less likely to challenge China—let's say as a temporary member of the United Nations Security Council. Are you concerned that we may be sliding toward a bipolar world where China's influence is on the one side and the West is on the other?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We must do everything we can to avoid doing that. The Prime Minister and President Biden's build back better programmes—the clean green initiatives—are designed to consolidate and make more available the kind of offer that the West can make to countries such as the ones that you mentioned, and to give them a choice, as they seek to develop, that possibly they feel they do not have at the moment. It is either Chinese money or no money. It is either the Chinese way of doing things or retarding their development.

Q331 Chair: We need a counterweight, essentially.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We for sure need a counterweight. My experience of speaking to some counterparts in some of the countries that you mentioned is that they would prefer not to have to take that Chinese money. They actually do not like the Chinese way of governing themselves, but economic considerations sometimes outweigh that. We have a lot to build on as liberal democracies and open societies, but we need a counter-proposal to the Belt and Road.

Q332 Chair: There is work to be done for the West, then.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes, there is work to be done for the West.

Q333 Chair: Otherwise this is going to be China's century. Post Afghanistan, the West is looking a little more fragile and risk-averse, and there does not seem to be a clear strategy for how to handle Russia's increasing adventurism. If you were Russia, given western distractions and divisions, would you agree that there has never been a better time to consider invading Ukraine? As NATO leaders meet in Latvia, if we are going to stand up to Russia do we not need to put some serious hardware into Ukraine? Otherwise, Russia will exploit our weakness.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: What I would say to anybody in Russia considering this would be that there is never going to be a good time to make an incursion into Ukraine, and they should not make the mistake of



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interpreting a withdrawal from Afghanistan as a lack of willingness on the part of western allies to stand up for sovereign democracies wherever they are in the world, but certainly in mainland Europe. I am aware that Russian actions sometimes seem to be driven by an opportunistic type of motivation, and I would counsel them very clearly not to fall into that trap now.

Chair: If they are listening to you—

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Who knows?

Q334 **Chair:** If they are, I hope they will heed your words. I think they would take the West more seriously if we placed some hardware into Ukraine, because they are looking for a buffer between the EU—the West—and themselves. I am not sure, given Afghanistan, that they think that we will react in any way, other than to condemn it, were they to take part of eastern Ukraine.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I can absolutely assure you, the Committee and indeed Russian counterparts if they are listening that there will be considerably more activity than a mere condemnation.

Q335 **Chair:** Can you expand on that?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would rather not, because that is ultimately a decision for the Prime Minister, but I have absolutely no doubt that that would be the case. Indeed, I have been speaking to my counterparts in all the countries that you would expect. Likewise, the Foreign Secretary has. Likewise, the Defence Secretary has. There is a significant programme of work to identify the measures that we would take if such a thing happened.

Chair: If the Russians are tuning in, I am sure their ears suddenly pricked up given what you just said, which is good news. Let's turn to Defence spending.

Q336 **Sarah Atherton:** I would like to look at the goals of the Integrated Review. Sir Stephen, you mentioned to the Public Accounts Committee that new defence money was "not all going to go on new and revolutionary kit." But there are valid concerns that the £24 billion uplift will be used to fill the black hole in the defence budget. How will you, as the National Security Adviser, ensure that that does not happen and that we do not see future black holes?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: This is, in a sense, drawing more on my previous experience at the MoD than as National Security Adviser. Ultimately, responsibility for the finances is with the permanent secretary and the Secretary of State. It was certainly the case when I arrived at the Department in 2015 that the budgets were out of balance. Whether one chooses to describe it as a black hole or not, we had an unaffordable programme which, on a pretty regular basis, required us to take less than ideal decisions to be able to keep important capabilities in the field or continued in development. We had a problem with that, and the lack of



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long-term money meant that our planning horizons for inevitably long-term programmes were foreshortened and sub-optimal.

I would say that the additional funds, which were agreed for four years in November last year, did put us on the right track. They were not merely a question of filling in the hole. Although certainly a part of it was about rebalancing, alongside it came decisions not only to invest in new capabilities but to retire quite a lot of older capabilities. It was a fundamental reset of the way in which the MoD ran its finances.

I know that the current permanent secretary is determined to maintain that reset, such that the finances do not get out of balance again, but we are only about 12 months into it and we will see. I do not anticipate that it is an inevitability that an unaffordable programme will re-emerge.

Q337 Sarah Atherton: What is the centre's role in ensuring that the strategic goals of the Integrated Review will be met?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I act for the Prime Minister in this. The Integrated Review is the Prime Minister's document, and it was his vision for how Britain should be present in the world for the foreseeable future. Clearly, the centre was intimately involved, along with other Departments, in producing the document in the first place and making sure that the ambitions were reasonable, credible, properly funded and capable of implementation. Now that we have published it, there are a range of different governance arrangements which are in place. At the head of it is the National Security Council, obviously chaired by the Prime Minister, but underneath that is a host of other bits of architecture which are designed to do exactly what you suggest—make sure that the big strategic themes are fulfilled.

There are very many specific individual initiatives underneath the Integrated Review—I just wrote to the Prime Minister about them and, the last time I looked, I think there were 148 of them—which we are tracking. The majority of them are on track, and some are off track with recommendations to get them back to where they need to be. So there are quite a lot of people and quite a lot of organisation designed to do what you suggest.

Q338 Sarah Atherton: I know that my colleagues want to come in, but I have one last question. We saw a temporary reduction in the foreign aid budget at the same time that the defence budget was substantially increased, which you can understand gave the impression that you were focusing more on military solutions as opposed to solving political problems. Do you agree with or have any comments on that statement?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would not agree with that. I would say that, in terms of hard security threats, the world is a more complex and more threatening place than it was perhaps 10 years ago. That needed to be reflected and was, I think, responsibly reflected in the settlement. The pandemic was a factor in whatever the Chancellor and Prime Minister were considering when that temporary reduction took place.



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Q339 **Richard Drax:** Happy birthday, Sir Stephen. As a former soldier, a lot of my colleagues, and indeed, a lot of those who have not served, are completely baffled about why the Prime Minister said that there would be no cuts to our Armed Forces. Ten thousand troops are to leave the Army, when, as you have said, we are living in a very unstable time, with China, Russia, and other threats around the world. I would have thought that, as one of the strongest NATO countries, we should not send out to the world the signal that we are cutting our Armed Forces in addition to the £1.25 billion cut in the MoD budget, which also rather surprised me.

Q340 When you discussed this with the Prime Minister, did you get involved in those decisions? I know that it is all about money—I quite understand that—but defence is all about a priority as far as I am concerned, and I would have thought that priority No. 1 is to keep our country safe. Where does that cut fit in with the overall picture that you are talking about?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Of course the No. 1 priority is to keep the country safe. That is absolutely the case, and that is certainly, obviously, the Prime Minister's position. I would not equate the number of soldiers with a direct relationship with whether the country is investing in the Armed Forces. It is quite obviously the case that we are putting money into the Armed Forces. The priority is to make sure that we have the right outcomes here. The right outcomes are likely to be gained by having the right people using the right, most up-to-date kit. That is really what the settlement was about.

Q341 **Richard Drax:** Sorry, Sir Stephen, but what if we do not have enough people to operate that sophisticated kit? I suspect boots on the ground have been cut because all that new kit—cyberspace and all the rest of it—is so expensive, and I understand that, but it is a matter of priorities. Seventy-two thousand is a very small Army at a time when the world is incredibly unstable. I quite understand that the sophisticated kit we need is important to maintain our defence posture, but I would still argue, as many do, that when the Prime Minister or Chancellor says, "Can I please have a division, or possibly two?" the answer will be, "Sorry, you have got a brigade, at best." That time might come one day; we cannot discount it.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It would be irresponsible for military leaders and defence leaders to come up with a plan that had the right amount of kit but too few people to operate it, so I do not believe that that is what has happened. Seventy-three thousand is not a number that has been plucked out of the air, driven by finances. It will be because they believe, at the moment, given the requirements and the material with which they have to work, that that is the right number for the Army.

I do think we need to look at outputs. I do not want to be in a position like that of some of our NATO allies. They have failed to invest the amount of money needed in equipment and have continued to employ too many people with the wrong type of equipment, meaning that they were very likely to be ineffective in combat. I do not think we are in that position.

Chair: Apologies, but we need to make progress. Mark, very quickly.



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Q342 **Mr Francois:** Sir Stephen, on the equipment plan, you said for years—quite rightly—that the budget has been out of kilter. Someone once put it colloquially that the MoD's eyes are always bigger than its tummy. This year, with the plus-up, it is all meant to finally be in balance, yet waiting for the equipment plan is becoming like waiting for Godot. If it is all going to add up, can you tell us when the MoD's equipment plan is finally going to be published?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I'm afraid I cannot tell you that. I will take that away. I was not aware that it was especially late this year. It is normally in November.

Q343 **Mr Francois:** If it has been published, we have missed it. We are at the end of November. Your contention is that this time, with the extra money, we have made it all add up. If that is the case, you should be able to publish the plan. Why the delay?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I'm afraid I cannot answer the question. I do not know the answer. I will happily try and find out.

Mr Francois: If you could.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I will, yes.

Q344 **Derek Twigg:** Sir Stephen, given your role as the national security adviser and all the issues you deal with, what is it that you lose most sleep over? To put it another way, what are you worried most about?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am not in a position to talk about all the things I lose sleep about, even in front of this august Committee.

Derek Twigg: Give us some idea.

Mr Francois: Give us midnight to 3 am, then.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We clearly need to develop the right kind of posture—this was mentioned earlier—in an entirely credible way to ensure that some of those actors who wish us harm are encouraged not to cause us harm. We could probably signal that rather better than we do at the moment. I know that in some people's minds there have been a few missteps on that front.

I also worry about some of the new technologies that could be used against us in a way that we will find it very difficult to either identify or attribute. Grey zone contestation, which is around us all the time, is only growing. That is inevitably more difficult for us to deal with, more difficult for us to call out, and more corrosive of our society. Those are some of the things that keep me awake. There are some others, but I will maybe speak about them in a different setting.

Chair: Maybe we can invite you to a private session. We would be delighted to explore this a bit further.

Q345 **Derek Twigg:** One thing the Committee wants to try and tease out is the public buy-in to our defence strategy, the Integrated Review and the



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Defence Command Paper. What do you think it is? Is there a wide understanding among the population? Is it very small? Does it worry the Government if it is not well understood? Have you done any polling or had focus groups to check what the public understanding is of the Integrated Review, the Command Paper and our general defence and security policy?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We do follow the polling.

Q346 **Derek Twigg:** What does it show?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: A couple of things, I think. One is that the Integrated Review was recognised as being a coherent and sensible vision of Britain in the world; that is certainly there. Other bits of the polling show that, notwithstanding the scenes in Kabul, the British population's appetite for Britain to be active in the world in all forms, including the use of force, has remained remarkably stable.

The one thing I would say though is that when I have seen polling about the things that occupy British citizens the most, almost always at the top are the things that you would expect—health policy, the economy, education; those are all very steady—and security considerations are usually quite low down. But there are moments, driven typically by external events, where they come right at the very top and they outstrip absolutely everything. Those are the moments when the British population spend more time thinking about defence. We have had a few of those types of events recently, but not really enormous ones—not going to war-type ones—but I would expect that to continue.

On the whole, we do not believe that there is any evidence to suggest that the British population think we are on the wrong track. I do know that AUKUS in particular did catch the popular imagination much more than I think anybody thought it might do, it being a slightly technical subject about machines that the vast majority of people—

Q347 **Chair:** It think it was more to do with France's reaction rather than this being a whopper of a procurement deal with the United States and Australia.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I was hoping it was because it was a brilliant strategic development, but you may well be right.

Q348 **Derek Twigg:** So in general, as a result of polling and focus groups, you think that public understanding is higher than some people might think. In percentage terms, are we talking 40%, 50% or 60% of the population who actually get our security and defence policy? Are there any figures you can put on it?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I cannot pluck those out of the top of my head; I am happy to go away and have a look to see whether I can write back to you on that.

Q349 **Chair:** To pursue that thread a bit, would you agree that on the current trajectory, the world is likely to get more unstable than less in the next



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five to 10 years? It is a question that we have asked many who have sat in that seat.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes, I would.

Q350 **Chair:** With that in mind, is it wise to spell out the threats to the British people, so we can be prepared as to what may be coming over the horizon?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think on the whole, yes, that is the case. We are an open society and it is the right of every citizen to be apprised—responsibly—of some of the threats that we can see. Obviously, that should not be done in tremendous detail, because that might compromise all manner of things.

Q351 **Chair:** Maybe not the things that keep you up at night—we will save those for another occasion—but absolutely anybody can see that authoritarianism is on the rise, extremism continues to flourish, climate change brings a whole raft of issues, and of course the West, as I touched on, seems to be a little bit risk-averse. We could do with some international leadership. We need to lean into these things.

Q352 When it comes to our hard power, and indeed our soft power, we would argue as a Committee—I hope that the Committee agrees—that if you spell out to the British people exactly the status of our Armed Forces, they would want to invest more. The F-35s, our mainstay aircraft for the future, have been cut from 138 to just 48—there are plans to buy more potentially, but right now there is no money—and when it comes to our frigates and destroyers, we simply do not have enough for the maritime commitments that we want to keep around the world. As Richard Drax said earlier, we are cutting back our troop numbers. As Operation Pitting reflected, when troops are required; AI and drones and so forth cannot hold ground, they cannot stabilise, they cannot do all those things that we failed to do properly in Afghanistan. The big question is, should we not be selling this to the British people a bit more, because, as I say, when we relay this to the British public they are more than enthusiastic, as they were with the DfID funding, to say, “Now I know where its going to go, now I know why its important, now I know why we should be keeping our country and our interests safe, yes, let’s invest in it” ?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Chair, as you would expect, given my background and the job that I do, I agree with you. The Integrated Review, when it was launched, brought very favourable responses. The men and women who keep us safe and work in the security establishments and in our Armed Forces are people to have great pride in. I would be very, very happy to broaden the debate about these subjects much more widely than has commonly been the case. We have begun to take some steps in that direction. I am not wholly keen on having a very high public profile myself because I am a civil servant, but I think that there is a role for engaging civic groups, think-tanks, newspapers and whatever it may be in order to spell out where we think the major problems are and why we are doing the things that we are doing. Typically, they get a favourable hearing.



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Q353 **Chair:** On the migration issues that we are experiencing, you have to look at the source, at where these people are coming from. Libya, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and so on—these are countries that we leant into and then did not have the strategic patience to see it through. Mali is another one where we are now involved militarily, but I do not know what the strategic long-term plan is. I think it is going to be all the more important over the next decade for us to be more ambitious in trying to put some of these fires out around the world. Would you agree?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes, and I think that that is the message of the Integrated Review. The statement in it is, I think, that the Prime Minister wants the UK to be a problem-solving, burden-sharing nation, and to be more active in the areas of the world where it is necessary and, indeed, there is an appetite for British leadership, which there is. I think you can see some evidence of that already, but we have further to go.

Q354 **Chair:** We are seeing that with the new Foreign Secretary, who I think is in Latvia. It is great to see her in a Challenger tank, but it could very well be that one of those tanks is going to be mothballed because we are reducing our tank numbers from 227 to 148. We cannot even field a full division as part of our NATO commitment. Would you join us in hoping that she will see the benefit of retaining our hard power capability—our armoured fighting capability—and retain the Challenger tank?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have absolutely no doubt that the Foreign Secretary is completely aware of the importance of having credible hard power. I have no doubt about that at all.

Chair: Good. We have made the point.

John Spellar: Was she wearing a headscarf at the same time?

Chair: You've not seen the pictures, clearly.

Q355 **John Spellar:** Earlier you talked about China being a superpower, but surely it has the potential to emerge as a superpower rather than having arrived there. In spite of that potential, and the possible international or regional reaction to that, a considerable number of internal divisions and structural weaknesses may impede it. Should we not be looking at the timeline of China?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Those are very good points. In fact, we had a day-long seminar on China—*[Interruption.]* Apologies.

Chair: That'll be Liz Truss, confirming that we are retaining the tanks.

Mr Francois: It's either her or President Xi.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It says no caller ID, which is always a bit suspicious, I have noticed.

I think it would be difficult to argue that China was not already an economic superpower. It is second only to America, and if the current trajectory is maintained, will probably overtake it at some point. Is it a



military superpower? As the hypersonic reporting has just indicated, it is clearly developing some extraordinarily advanced weapons systems that are absolutely at the cutting edge globally, which we need to take notice of. Is it a superpower in that it has spread its wealth evenly? No. Is it a superpower in that it knows necessarily how responsibly to exercise its military might? Probably no. Is it a superpower in that it has deep operational experience in using its military might? No.

The internal pressures and tensions that you talk about are real. We often get a sense of China as a monolith, whereas it is clearly not a monolith. It has many problems, which will be very tricky to solve. Lack of water and desertification is a big question for China. With a growing population with much greater economic expectations, that is not going to be an easy problem for China to fix. It certainly tells us that, as a policy community and as law makers, parliamentarians and commentators, we need a much better understanding of what makes China tick and where the problems for it might be than we have at the moment.

Q356 John Spellar: Does your current security architecture encompass that? You mentioned operating in the grey zone earlier. If we look at countries that operate effectively in the grey zone, they have a well integrated and full spectrum approach, whereas ours tends to be—or appears to be—more siloed. Are we pulling those together effectively?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would say that we are, actually. I do not see the Whitehall architecture as particularly siloed. The National Cyber Force is a really good example of that—an incredibly close collaboration between the Ministry of Defence and GCHQ, which is totally integrated. The thing that inhibits us in the grey zone is our laws and ethics. The kinds of things that people who wish us harm are prepared to do are things that we would not countenance doing. We would not undermine other people's democracies. We would not seek to interfere with the findings of international organisations. We would not seek to do all the things that others have done to us. That is where they have the—I hesitate to say "advantage", because our rule of law and moral compass is an enormous advantage for our country, but certainly in some of this grey zone activity it means that we are necessarily more circumscribed than some others are.

Q357 John Spellar: Are they not much more effective at drawing together a message to cause disruption in our ranks—the disinformation campaigns that they are sowing in our Western democracies, the infiltration of social media? Are they not much better focused on that? Is that just ethics, or is it the fact that we have not really adapted to this modern grey zone of warfare?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think it is more ethics, to be honest. The case study is Salisbury. Post Salisbury, we know that that Russia put out 26—I think that was the number—false narratives and explanations of what happened in Salisbury. We cannot be in a world where the British Government can do anything other than speak the truth about it. We will have one answer to that; we will not have 26. We will not even have two;



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we will have one, and we will call it as we see it. In certain circumstances, in a fairly narrowly circumscribed way, we might possibly say that their attempts at disinformation, misinformation, are therefore more effective, but I see no alternative, when it is important, but to play straight.

Q358 John Spellar: Continuing to look at the architecture, strategies are a vital tool, not least in signalling intent. However, they have to be implemented to be effective—it is that seamless path. How do you see your role in implementing the Integrated Review, the Defence Command Paper and the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The Integrated Review part of it I described earlier, but I am happy to recap. I am the secretary to the National Security Council. I provide the Prime Minister with advice and updates on the progress of the priority actions that he wishes to pursue, and make sure that the various arms of Government are integrated in the pursuit of those objectives, either at the strategic level or at the highly operational level. During the drawdown from Afghanistan, for instance, I chaired a daily meeting for three weeks to make sure that the MoD was on the same page as the Foreign Office, the Home Office and so on. That integration role is very important.

The Defence Command Paper is rightly the responsibility of the Defence Secretary, and I wouldn't wish to at all stand on his toes on that. Again, we do have some elements of the Integrated Review and some elements of the deal that was done in November of last year where we continue to pay closer attention to it, in the centre, than certain other areas. I will continue to do that and I have regular meetings with colleagues in Defence just to check on those things.

Again, the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy is mainly the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence, but I was intimately involved in the origination of that and I believe strongly that the way in which we use our industrial strategy in this area needs to be more sophisticated and more mature. There are certain areas—shipbuilding is one, but there are certain other areas on the tech side as well—where we need to be more thoughtful, more engaged and more active than in less difficult areas of the economy. I continue to pay some attention to that, but that's a little bit more of a personal view, rather than anything else.

Q359 John Spellar: Well, have a word with the Defence Secretary about the fleet solid support ships, if you would. What are the key milestones out of that, as you see it now, for defence going forward?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Out of the Integrated Review?

John Spellar: Yes.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The Integrated Review was, as much as anything else, a statement of intent and ambition, allied with concrete activity. The manifestation of that for defence is in the Defence Command Paper. The Prime Minister will expect the Defence Department to fulfil its capability requirements. Not all of those are on the right track, as we



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know. He will expect it to do the things that it has said it is going to do with its workforce, and he will expect it to adjust the force posture in the way that he has set out. All those things are trackable. Most of those things are in the Defence Command Paper. They are checked on, I know, in Defence very actively and we will be checking in on them from the Cabinet Office as well.

Q360 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Before I ask the next question, maybe I can make one brief point on John's points and your answer around the ethics of what some countries will choose to do that we would not—critically, around technology. There is a concern that what they are doing is utilising the frameworks that were already created by tech developers in the developed world. I am sure—I am hoping—you know what GAFAM means.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think I've heard the phrase, but I wouldn't mind a refresher.

Q361 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Oh yes, like FANG.

Q362 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Amazon's data centres probably accrue more data than every developed nation put together. That is across data centres across most countries in the world. It might even have data centres in communist China. But all the Chinese have done is to ape that process by creating BATX, which is Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent and Xiaomi. There is the idea that this is merely an ethical decision that built on technology that began in the developed world. It is a concern to many of us that we have allowed that technology in our own sphere to go unregulated—had we required more regulation, we might not be in the situation we are in today. There is concern that those companies have allowed this situation to happen. I am sure that most members of this Committee—every politician—will recognise that there is a kind of fake news element of many social media sites which attack Members. Building on what John has talked about—undermining liberal democracy—that is not necessarily coming just from terrain such as communist China; it is coming from unregulated social media companies with headquarters in our own countries.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think it is self-evident that proliferation—

Q363 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I am assuming you agree that those companies with headquarters in our own countries are as much a part of that narrative of undermining liberal democracy, and therefore a security risk, as those companies based in communist China or the Russian Federation.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would put it slightly differently. I don't think that the intention of those companies is to do that, but I do not disagree with you when I say that the technologies and the ethical frameworks that have been developed around them typically in the West are clearly posing very significant questions for all of us, and the kinds of subjects that the



head of the Secret Intelligence Service was raising today are a very good example of that. It would not be the first time in human history that something that had been invented for benign, or at least neutral purposes in the first place had got twisted in due course for malign or non-neutral purposes. I think this is an example of that. It is clearly one of the besetting questions of the age.

Q364 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank you. On to the next question, which is about integration, meaning prioritising amongst the competing interests within Whitehall, as well as between Whitehall, industry, the Armed Forces and our allies. How do you determine the prioritisation and whose role is it to do so?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: At the end of the day, issues of national security are for the Prime Minister. That is self-evidently the case, and that is self-evidently what happens in practice. We typically have hierarchies of objective in this area, because if we were to seek to defend ourselves against absolutely every single conceivable threat, we would not have any money for anything else at all, so we do need to prioritise. That is a mixture of increasing amounts of data, a great deal of analysis—our Joint Intelligence Organisation does a great deal of analysis, and the collation of analysis from the Departments, and to a certain extent a degree of judgment, as you would inevitably expect. All these things come together in the centre, in the National Security Secretariat, and advice is provided to the Prime Minister and he takes decisions accordingly.

Q365 Martin Docherty-Hughes: It is clear that the top decision is the PM's, so within the Prime Minister's relationship with the Treasury is there a willingness, either from the Treasury or the Prime Minister, to support defence in spending more on equipment built in the UK, rather than expecting defence to source cheaper options overseas, and—forgive me for mentioning it—to have an utter review of procurement, given what we are seeing with Ajax?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: This is a question that Mr Spellar was nudging at, and I personally very much agree with you. There was a time when Mrs Thatcher gave an instruction to the head of the Defence Procurement Agency to buy the most effective kit wherever it came from; she had no interest in supporting British industry in those decisions. I think that is probably now seen to have been a mistake. There are certain sovereign capabilities that, once gone, we will never get back. Defence is also more cognisant of the social role that it plays in supporting British industry. Much of that is expanded at considerable length in the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy, which marks the kind of strategic shift that you are talking about, but it was only published earlier this year. These are long-term projects. I hope that they will be seen to bear fruit.

Q366 Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am going to ask my colleague Mark Francois to take on the second bit of this question, but before I do, the equipment needs people. I don't know about the rest of the UK and Northern



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Ireland, but in Scotland at the moment we have six university officers training corps. Are you able to tell the Committee that not only will those six continue to exist this time next year, but all the rest of them across the UK and Northern Ireland will continue to exist?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am afraid I do not have any information on that. I think that is a question more properly directed, or more accurately directed, at colleagues in Defence. I am not aware of that.

Q367 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** The buck stopping with the PM on making these decisions about competing interests is not just about the equipment; it is about the people we hope to wear it in the future. Clearly, university officers training corps are an important part of the process of identifying people at a specific level who might want to enter the officer corps. Would that decision therefore lie with the Prime Minister?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Whether or not that specific decision lies with the Prime Minister—probably it is more likely that he would have delegated it to the Defence Secretary—is not something that I am sighted on. I would imagine that it is probably the latter.

Q368 **Mr Francois:** I declare an interest: I served in two ATCs, sir, and they are a thoroughly good thing. You mentioned the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and the MoD, because in national security terms you clearly have an oversight role reporting to the Prime Minister. Have you read the PAC report, "Improving the performance of major defence equipment contracts"?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have, yes.

Q369 **Mr Francois:** You have. The punchline, if you like, is the final sentence of the executive summary, which says: "To meet the aspirations of the Integrated Review, the Department's broken system for acquiring military equipment needs an urgent rethink, led by HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office." As the National Security Adviser, what is your reaction to that?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is broadly what is happening at the moment. The procurement processes in the Ministry of Defence are being overhauled by the new permanent secretary and the Defence Secretary, and he has been very open about that. They are adopting more closely some of the techniques that the Treasury recommends that all Departments adopt. There are various aspects to that, which we probably do not want to go into here.

Mr Francois: We might.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Well, there are three-stage processes, strategic outline cases, and so on and so forth. The Cabinet Office, through the Integrated Review, clearly has a role in making sure that the Defence Department, the Foreign Office and the Home Office are all playing their part in achieving the ambitions set out in the Integrated Review. Clearly, that is not the same as diving into every single detail, because there simply are not enough—



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Q370 **Mr Francois:** You are talking about the system. Within Whitehall, “review” is a powerful word, so I want to check whether I heard you correctly. You said that the Defence Secretary, working with other Departments, is now reviewing the Defence procurement process. Did I hear you right?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: There is a process that was starting as I was leaving the Department that goes by the acronym MAID, which is the MoD Approach to Investment Decisions. I have not been very recently updated on where it has got to. I know that the Secretary of State, since I left, has set up a unit of net assessment and challenge, which is designed to get into this as well. I think there is plenty to be looked at here. There is an ongoing process of seeking to improve. Everybody knows that it needs to improve. Nobody is resiling from the comments that you made earlier. Ajax is a good example where clearly it did not go right.

Q371 **Mr Francois:** With respect, the PAC called it a catastrophe. I know you read a lot, sir. Have you read the Infrastructure and Projects Authority’s annual report, which came out in July this year?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That I haven’t read.

Q372 **Mr Francois:** I commend it to you. It goes through all the major Government infrastructure projects from HS2 downwards. It looked at the top 36 procurement programmes in the MoD. It grades them on the traffic light system from red, which basically means you are very unlikely ever to get there, to green, which means you are on schedule both on time and cost. Ajax and Crowsnest, for instance, were red. As you are the National Security Adviser, of the 36, how many were green?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am afraid I do not know the answer to that question because I have not read the report.

Q373 **Mr Francois:** Of the 36, how many would you expect to be green?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: To be honest, my experience of these programmes across Government in a variety of different places is that they are very long and very complex and they usually go wrong at some point or other, but they are sufficiently long to mean that over the course of the programme remedial action can be taken to get it back on track. The carriers were a good example of that, which must have been red for a very long time.

Q374 **Mr Francois:** Before the Chairman starts tapping his watch, of the 36—

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would imagine very few of them were green.

Q375 **Mr Francois:** None. You have got the 36 top procurement programmes in the MoD. You are talking about nearly £150 billion of taxpayers’ money, and not a single one is on track—not any of them. That is a broken system by any definition.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Mr Francois, I absolutely do not deny at all that the procurement system in the Ministry of Defence, as it probably does in other areas of Government, needs to be improved. We are all deeply



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aware of that, and nobody is happy about the mistakes and missteps that are made. I believe that it was moving in the right direction, albeit probably not fast enough—I am sure not fast enough when I left—but I agree with you that that is not a great picture to be presented with. I would not want to resile from that at all.

Q376 **Mr Francois:** I think the Committee hears what you are saying. In Afghanistan, for all the AI and high tech that we constantly hear about, which is fundamental in the integrated operating concept, and with all of this amazing kit, we were still run out of Kabul by a bunch of country boys with RPGs, weren't we?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Er—

Q377 **Mr Francois:** Well, we were.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The Chief of the Defence Staff has been very clear about that. The reality was that as soon as our main ally, the US, took the decision to withdraw, the central assumption was always going to be that there would be a Taliban Government in place. Whether or not you characterise that as being run out of town by a bunch of country boys, I don't know. It was a successful evacuation in very difficult terms.

Q378 **Mr Francois:** Op Pitting was amazing. It was the MoD at its best, to be fair, in case you think all we do is criticise. It really was the MoD at its best, but it was recovering from what was a strategic defeat, wasn't it?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would probably refer to Generals Milley and McKenzie and Secretary of State Austin when they were giving evidence in front of the congressional Committee and they described the evacuation as a tactical triumph and overall representing a strategic defeat.

Q379 **Mr Francois:** I think that is fair comment. Lastly—I am keeping myself honest—I had a meeting today with an Afghan veteran on a completely different subject, but I mentioned en passant that we were taking evidence from you this afternoon, and he said, "Could you ask him a question for me?" I am keeping myself honest. He said, "Ask the National Security Adviser, after all the blood and treasure that we lost, after all the guys that we lost and all the wounded"—these are his words— "was it worth it?"

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think—

Q380 **Mr Francois:** I can give you his name outside the Committee.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: No, I think that is a completely legitimate question. Of course, it must be one that we all have to ask ourselves. The picture as it is unfolding in Afghanistan at the moment looks to be a pretty dreadful one. It is true that we and other allies sacrificed much by way of human life and resources in Afghanistan, and the country, as I say, does not look like it is unfolding well.

There are some things that one would point to as being, one would hope, lasting improvements. Many young people in Afghanistan have been born and brought up in a more accommodating, liberal environment, and that



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may play its part. Women and girls have been educated over the last 20 years, and they cannot be uneducated—that may play its part. A great deal of infrastructure has been built. But have we left a functioning state which is likely to be free of oppression and deprivation for the majority of its citizens? No, we have not. It is a very good question. I—

Q381 **Mr Francois:** Lastly—sorry to interrupt you, sir—I hope I speak for the Committee and am not being presumptuous when I say that we all have nothing but the greatest of respect for our veterans, who fought valiantly. They have nothing to be ashamed of.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Nothing at all.

Q382 **Mr Francois:** We are more worried about whether we have learned strategic lessons from the outcome. Hindsight makes geniuses of everybody, politicians and senior civil servants alike. But, looking back on this, we—not the veterans; the people running the show—didn't do the best job we could, did we?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We didn't. Why? As you can imagine, we have done some lessons learned on this, NATO is doing lessons learned on this and other allies are doing lessons learned on this. We are comparing notes. You can identify a bunch of things which potentially we did not do right. There was clearly a degree of mission creep. We failed, I think, to invest in a political leadership cadre that many Afghans could feel loyalty and faith in—

Chair: We have been told that we have a vote coming up shortly.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: And probably, in general, we overestimated our ability—or we fooled ourselves about how easy it would be—to impose a western values system on a culture and country like Afghanistan. There will be plenty of time, and there is plenty of activity and thinking going on, but those will definitely be some of the things that we will think about, plus many others, I am sure.

Mr Francois: Can I just say that those are some of the most honest answers that I think we have ever been given on what happened?

Q383 **Chair:** Can I echo Mark's comments? We have been seeking a review led by Government, and you are saying that you are doing some lessons learned.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We are, yes.

Q384 **Chair:** I will not press you, because it would be unfair to ask you as a civil servant whether you agree that we should have a more open, transparent inquiry into what has happened. That is exactly what we are doing. We would be grateful, however, if you could share the lessons that you have learned from your internal process so that we can add them to our inquiry.

Q385 Further to that, you and I attended the IISS Manama dialogue in Bahrain—it was really good to see you there—along with Richard Moore.



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You will be aware that a lot of criticism was directed at the United States—at Lloyd Austin and indeed at Brett McGurk—saying, “What are your intentions, United States? Are you going to be there? What will you do leadership-wise on the international stage?” In the spirit of the Integrated Review, will Britain seek greater leadership and greater responsibility to lead countries—in the Gulf, NATO allies and so on—in the absence of the United States, if it is not willing to step forward?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: There is no doubt that Britain is going to seek to play more than its proportionate part in that. The Prime Minister is very clear that there is an appetite for British leadership which he wants to sate. He feels passionately engaged in that, so we will definitely be as active as we possibly can in seeking to play more than our fair share in solving some of the world’s more intractable problems and in helping developing nations to develop in the way that they would like and that we would like to see them.

I myself do not see a retreat of America from the world stage—I think that is close to inconceivable—although I was certainly party to many of the same conversations as you in Manama.

Q386 **Chair:** Thank you. Further to that, from the perspective of the National Security Council as a vehicle to make decisions, how many times has it met in the last 12 months?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I cannot give you an absolutely accurate answer to that. I would say somewhere between 15 and 20 times. The Prime Minister is clear, and I have a good deal of sympathy on this, that the rhythm of a weekly National Security Council did not necessarily allow for strategic thought. Some things discussed at those National Security Councils could have been done more effectively at a lower level, and that is what we are trying to do at the moment.

Q387 **Chair:** From what I understand, they are quite hasty meetings. There is no opportunity to really digest and go into the detail of issues, or for Cabinet members to be able to express their views, ask questions and so on. There seems to be an encouragement to say, “Let’s move on; we’ve all got other things to do.”

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have not seen that. I am not saying that it is not true, but I have not seen that in the meetings that I have attended.

Q388 **Chair:** Turning to covid, which is a massive, enduring emergency, there was this impression that No. 10 created a new construct to deal with it rather than using existing systems for enduring emergencies that brought together expertise from right across the piece. Do you agree that there were perhaps better ways we could have done that?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: There is absolutely no question but that we could have done that better. One of the first things I did when I started as a national security adviser was to institute a review—that is an important word in Whitehall, to pick up on Mr Francois’s point—because it was pretty clear that the machinery upon which we were drawing to deal with a chronic, enduring crisis of that type was not actually designed for that kind



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of crisis. It was designed for floods or terrorist attacks, which it is very good at; it is not necessarily so good at the type of crisis that covid has represented.

Q389 **Chair:** You had in charge of departments some well-intentioned people, but they were not trained in enduring emergencies or planning for crises, hence some of the curious decisions that were made.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The review that I am talking about is coming to an end. When it is, I hope, approved by Ministers, I will be very happy to write to you to let you know what changes we are going to make. We certainly need to improve.

Q390 **Chair:** On the pandemic, is biosecurity one of the things that keeps you up at night?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It is, yes.

Q391 **Chair:** Reflecting back on what happened, how do you think the pandemic started?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I'm afraid I do not know the answer to that question. I have no—

Q392 **Chair:** I cannot believe you haven't thought about this a bit further.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think that most people who have looked into this believe that there is no absolutely firm evidence for any of the various theories.

Chair: You have been saved by the bell. We had a couple of other questions that we wanted to put to you, so if we may, we will write to you with those. As we have a Division, we will have to call the end of the sitting early. Thank you very much indeed, Sir Stephen. In Mark's words, you have been very open, frank and transparent, and we really appreciate it.