



# Liaison Committee

## Oral evidence from the Prime Minister, HC 322

Wednesday 27 May 2020

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Hilary Benn; Mr Clive Betts; Karen Bradley; Chris Bryant; Sarah Champion; Greg Clark; Yvette Cooper; Stephen Crabb; Mr Tobias Ellwood; Robert Halfon; Ms Harriet Harman; Meg Hillier; Simon Hoare; Jeremy Hunt; Darren Jones; Catherine McKinnell; Stephen McPartland; Ian Mearns; Huw Merriman; Caroline Nokes; Mel Stride; Stephen Timms; Tom Tugendhat; Pete Wishart; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-109

### Witness

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

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



## Examination of witness

Witness: Boris Johnson.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome, Prime Minister, to your first evidence session with the Liaison Committee. The Committee is very grateful to you for responding so promptly to the invitation that we sent towards the end of last week, and I would like to thank the working group of members of the Committee, established by the whole Committee, which helped set this up very quickly. The working group has agreed the topics to be discussed and in consequence the Chairs who are representing the Committee today.

The last time we had a Prime Minister before this Committee was 12 months ago. The Committee agreed that this sitting will focus on the coronavirus crisis, but there remain very many other policy areas, such as Brexit, international issues, trade agreements, and other domestic policies, that require cross-departmental scrutiny. So can I ask you, Prime Minister, as a housekeeping point: can you commit to attending regularly this year, and preferably before the House rises again for the summer recess?

**The Prime Minister:** First, Bernard, thank you very much to you and your Committee for your invitation. I am delighted that we are able to have this session. You are very kind to want to see me again more frequently, even before we have completed this session, but can I possibly get back to you on that? Obviously, there is a lot on at the moment. We have a big national campaign to defeat the coronavirus, get our country back on its feet, and there is a huge amount of work that we are involved in. I am sure your Committee will appreciate that my time is scarce at the moment, but we will do everything we can to oblige.

Q2 **Chair:** I note that that is not a commitment, but I must insist that that was a very strong message that the Committee wanted me to convey.

**The Prime Minister:** I understand, and I am delighted to be here today.

Q3 **Chair:** Colleagues have assured me that their questions are going to be very short and to the point, and I would be grateful if you could confirm that you will give short and direct answers.

**The Prime Minister:** I will do my utmost, Sir Bernard, to oblige.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you for the advance copy of the announcement you are going to make in the Committee, but without time to scrutinise it in any depth, the Committee is concerned that it does not wish to be diverted from the questions that we have got. If your announcement is lengthy, I am afraid it will slightly lengthen the proceedings. I just warn you of that; I am sorry about that, but if you can keep your answers short, that will help us.

**The Prime Minister:** Of course.



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Q5 **Chair:** The Committee is obviously extremely concerned about the issue of your senior adviser. Polls suggest that a large majority of the public believe that your adviser did break the lockdown rules. How much do you think this has undermined the moral authority of the Government with the public at a time when public confidence in the Government is so important?

**The Prime Minister:** Bernard, thank you very much. I wasn't going to make a long announcement today about the test and trace scheme, but I thought perhaps your Committee would like to interrogate me about it if they have a chance to read what we are doing.

On that particular matter, all I would say is that this has really been going on for several days now, in the media at least, and I of course am deeply sorry for all the hurt, pain and anxiety that people have been going through throughout this period. This country has been going through a frankly most difficult time. We are asking people to do quite exceptionally tough things, separating them from their families. I must say that I feel that, from my adviser, to whom you refer, we have had quite a lot of autobiography recently. I have commented on it; I think people know my views. I really don't propose to add to it. I think what the public do want to focus on, if I may, Bernard, as far as we politicians possibly can, is uniting our message—to get to your point—focusing on their needs and explaining carefully what needs to be done next to get our country through this epidemic.

Q6 **Chair:** Prime Minister, you said on 24 May that Dominic Cummings had acted responsibly, legally and with integrity, and that reflects that special advisers are bound by the section on integrity in the civil service code. Why have you not invited the Cabinet Secretary to conduct his own independent inquiry in order to give you independent advice?

**The Prime Minister:** I do think that is a reasonable question to ask, but as I say, we have a huge amount of exegesis and discussion of what happened in the life of my adviser between 27 March and 14 April. Quite frankly, I am not certain, right now, that an inquiry into that matter is a very good use of official time. We are working flat out on coronavirus.

Q7 **Chair:** What advice have you sought from the Cabinet Secretary about compliance with the code and that matter of integrity in the code?

**The Prime Minister:** I have no reason to believe that there is any dissent from what I said a few days ago.

Q8 **Chair:** Has he had an opportunity to ask his own questions of your senior adviser?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not going to go into the discussions that have taken place, but I have no reason to depart from what I have already said.

Q9 **Chair:** Of course it is unprecedented for a special adviser to have their own press conference in the rose garden in Downing Street. How did you consult the Cabinet before agreeing to this?



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**The Prime Minister:** I thought that it would be a very good thing if people could understand what I had understood myself previously, I think on the previous day, about what took place—and there you go. We had a long go at it, and yeah, look, it's been a very frustrating episode and I understand why people have been so concerned, because this country is going through a horrendously difficult time, but I really think that, in so far as what we need to do is focus on getting the message right, which I think is probably common ground with your Committee, what we need to do really is move on and get on to how we are going to sort out coronavirus, which is really the overwhelming priority of the people of this country. We have a plan, we have been going through it, it's working and we're now coming tomorrow—28 May—to a very important next stage.

- Q10 **Pete Wishart:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister; it is good to see you at the Liaison Committee for the first time ever. Can I start by saying to you that I actually think you have been quite brave—brave in the way that you have been prepared to sacrifice the credibility and popularity of your own Government just to stand by your man. You have done something I have never seen done in the 20 years I have been in the House; you have somehow managed to unite a nation in condemnation and indignation over your handling of Mr Cummings. As the Chairman alluded to, 80% of the British public now think Dominic Cummings broke the rules; 63% said you should sack him. But the most worrying thing, Prime Minister, is that 65% say his conduct makes it less likely that the public will now follow lockdown rules. Surely, Prime Minister, no man is more important than keeping this nation safe.

**The Prime Minister:** Pete, if I may respectfully say, in addition to what I have already said about that particular matter, a lot of what was written and said over Saturday and Sunday was false in respect of my adviser. It wasn't correct. I think he has had an opportunity to clear the matter up and, notwithstanding the various party political points that you may seek to make and your point about the message, I respectfully disagree. I think actually, the best way to clarify the message, the best way for people to understand what we need to do next, is for us all to move on and focus on what we are doing tomorrow, what we are doing in June—

**Chair:** You have made that point, Prime Minister.

- Q11 **Pete Wishart:** Prime Minister, have you had a look at your inbox? My inbox, like those of MPs across the UK, is filled with people listing the sacrifices they have made to follow instructions that you set. I have had constituents who haven't been able to see their grandchildren and families for months; people who haven't been able to visit dying relatives or attend funerals.

**Chair:** What is the question?

**Pete Wishart:** Do you know what this looks like to them? One rule for those at the heart of Government and another rule for everyone else. He won't say sorry; will you say sorry on his behalf?

**The Prime Minister:** Of course, Pete, I am sorry; I am sorry for the pain, as I said, the anguish and the heartbreak of so many people in this



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country. By the way, there are people across Government at every level who have been going through exactly the same privations and difficulties, and of course we all understand that, and I share that. All I am saying to you is that I think that what we need to do now as politicians, as leaders, if we possibly can, is to set aside this row, because I am afraid a lot of the allegations turned out to be totally false, and to move on. I have said what I have had to say about that matter; I think that in so far as it is correct to say that it is a distraction, then by that very argument, now is the time to leave it aside and move on.

**Chair:** Point made.

Q12 **Pete Wishart:** This is just growing and growing, Prime Minister. The anger is reaching fever pitch. Riding this out just looks like petulant defiance—

**Chair:** Question, please.

**Pete Wishart:** It is almost as if you are goading the nation. You know that eventually you will have to let him go; why do you not just get on with it?

**Chair:** Anything to add, Prime Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** Pete, thank you so much for your point. I consider that to be a piece of—you are making a political point, giving a piece of political advice. I consider that what the Government need to do is focus on the needs of the nation, focus on sorting out this problem and on getting our message across, and that is what we are going to do.

Q13 **Stephen Crabb:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. You talk about the enormous national effort; you talk about the nation. How frustrating is it for you, as the UK Prime Minister during this enormous peacetime crisis, that we have not been able to act as one United Kingdom with one single set of clear rules, one joined-up strategy—or do you think that the variable geometry of our four nations approach actually reflects the strength of the Union at this time?

**The Prime Minister:** Stephen, that is a really good question. Actually, one of the interesting things, which you possibly would not get from my exchange with Pete Wishart, is that there has been fantastic co-operation, collaboration, between all four nations of the UK. If you look at the differences between our approaches, they are very marginal. To get to your point, it is very important that when there was a slight difference in the R, for instance, between one part of the UK or another, or when one of us has a slightly different problem with care homes overseen in Scotland or Wales, it is entirely sensible that there should be slightly different approaches, and that is indeed what we have seen. And you see that in many, many European countries.

Q14 **Stephen Crabb:** On that point about collaboration—

**Chair:** One sentence.

**Stephen Crabb:** How influential were the criticisms of the Scottish and



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Welsh First Ministers about the easing of lockdown rules ahead of your statement on 10 May? Did they effectively put a brake on or temper your own instincts to go further? Is that the reason why you gave a more cautious statement on that day? Are they having any influence over the approach you have taken?

**Chair:** Prime Minister.

**The Prime Minister:** Stephen, we all work together, and I listen very carefully to what Mark says, to what Arlene and Michelle say, to what Nicola says. Of course we think about it together. Actually, what we said on 10 May was a pretty cautious message, which we decided to—as everybody knows, to have a relaxation that encourages people who must go to work for their job, to go to work. It is still the case that if you can work from home, you should work from home. We also brought in some relaxations on exercise and people's ability to travel to take exercise—

**Stephen Crabb:** Only in England.

**The Prime Minister:** Actually, I was struck by the congruence rather than the disparity. I think it always suits those who have a separatist agenda—an agenda to breaking up the UK—to play up differences when in fact, the unity has been much more conspicuous than you might believe.

**Chair:** We are already four minutes behind, Prime Minister.

Q15 **Simon Hoare:** Prime Minister, do we not think, given the huge amount of cross-border traffic between the Republic and Northern Ireland, that we need to ensure that we are in as close lockstep as possible with the Republic, in order to ensure, as we take our baby steps to release lockdown, that all the people of the island of Ireland are as safe as possible?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. Absolutely, Simon, and I know that you follow this very closely from your vantage point on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and I thank you for all your work there. Just to say that I have a very good working relationship with Leo Varadkar. As you may know, we talk about what we are trying to do together as much as possible. One interesting thing is that clearly Ireland—the Republic of Ireland—will not be affected by any changes that we bring in on quarantine. We will keep the common travel area and you know about the co-operation that is going on with the app—so we are working together as closely as we possibly can.

Q16 **Simon Hoare:** If the R rate starts to creep up and lockdown needs to be replaced either as it is, or maybe become more full and robust, my inbox tells me that as a result of the last few days, the response of the British people is going to be far less energetic than it was first time round, and that is as a direct result of the activities of your senior adviser. You are right to say that we know what your views are; but frankly, Prime Minister, I don't think anybody understands why you hold those views. So what do we say to our constituents, who are likely to say, "You can keep your lockdown if it has to come back. If other people don't abide by it, why on earth should we?"



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**The Prime Minister:** Simon, I must say I don't think that's true about how the British people will respond to the next phases—to how to work the test and trace system. I don't think that is how they have responded at all throughout the crisis; they have responded with fantastic responsibility, and collectively we have got that R down and got the incidence of the disease down. But just suppose for a second that you were right, which I don't accept: that is all the more reason now for us to be consistent, clear in our message, driving those key messages, particularly about washing your hands, maintaining social distance, isolating if you have symptoms. All those things will continue to be absolutely vital as we move into the next phase. In the covid alert system, we are coming down from level 4 to level 3, and we hope to be taking a decision tomorrow, but all that depends—as you know what we are doing with schools, with non-essential retail, from 1 June, with car showrooms, with outdoor shops—on our ability to continue to get the R down, and that means we have got to be ruthless in our message.

**Chair:** Meg Hillier, briefly

Q17 **Meg Hillier:** Prime Minister, you said that a number of the allegations that are made about Dominic Cummings were false. You were with him for six hours; did you see the evidence to prove that?

**The Prime Minister:** Meg, I—you know, I don't want to go into—

**Meg Hillier:** Yes or no, Prime Minister? It is a simple question. Did you see the evidence?

**The Prime Minister:** I don't want to go into much more than I have said—

**Meg Hillier:** It is a simple question: did you see the evidence?

**The Prime Minister:** If it pleases you I will say yes, I did; but I don't want to—

Q18 **Meg Hillier:** Okay; that's fine. Prime Minister, as you saw the evidence, would you agree that it would be a good idea for the Cabinet Secretary to see that or for it to be published, and then this problem might be off your table?

**The Prime Minister:** I think, actually, I would not be doing my job if I were now to shuffle this problem into the hands of officials, who are—believe me, Meg—working flat out to deal with coronavirus, as the public would want. I know that there is a great political interest in this; I understand that completely, and I totally understand public indignation—I totally understand that. But as I understand things, and I have said what I have said about the whole business, I think it would be much better if we could now move on and focus on the next steps.

Q19 **Chair:** We must try to avoid repeating ourselves. Let us move on to Yvette Cooper.

**The Prime Minister:** Well, I don't know how—when I get asked the same question, what else can I do?

Q20 **Yvette Cooper:** Prime Minister, I have to say that it is extremely



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surprising that you will not provide that evidence to the Cabinet Secretary or have any independent verification of it. Let me ask you about your instructions now to parents who either have covid or have the symptoms of covid, who do not know how seriously they will get it and who have no local childcare available. Is the message to those parents now the one from Jenny Harries: to stay at home unless there is a risk to life, and if you do get ill, contact the community hubs? Or is it the message from the Transport Secretary and the Communities Secretary: to travel to wherever you have a support network—in the words of Robert Jenrick this morning, “if you don’t have ready access to childcare, then you can do as Dominic Cummings” did? Which is it?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not certain that there is as much of a discrepancy between those two bits of advice as you suggest. I think what Jenny was trying to say was that if you have exceptional difficulties with childcare, you should take account of them.

Q21 **Yvette Cooper:** Okay, but we are not talking about exceptional difficulties with childcare. We are talking about very normal difficulties with childcare. A survey from Mumsnet today found that a quarter of parents—a quarter—said that they did not have access to local childcare when they had covid and were in exactly the same circumstances as Dominic Cummings. A third of them said that they would be more likely to break the rules now. If you are trying to tackle local outbreaks and prevent them spreading, you need to be giving clear advice to parents. What is it? It is not clear to me, from listening to Jenny Harries and Robert Jenrick, what that advice is to parents who are in Dominic Cummings’s situation.

**The Prime Minister:** The clear advice is to stay at home unless you absolutely have to go to work to do your job. If you have exceptional problems with childcare, that may cause you to vary your arrangements; that is clear. We are also saying from tomorrow—this is an important development—that there is a new test and trace operation, which will change people’s lives and will require a great deal of thought and compliance, but which I think will be worth it for the whole nation. The fundamental advice remains absolutely unchanged, which is to wash your hands, observe social distancing, self-isolate if you have symptoms and get a test.

Q22 **Yvette Cooper:** That was not the question I asked. I am asking specifically about your advice to parents who have covid—advice that you are not giving. The reason you are not giving it—the reason you are ducking it—

**The Prime Minister:** I am not ducking it. Actually, I have just said that I agree—I don’t think that you are—

Q23 **Yvette Cooper:** [*Inaudible.*] Do you want them to travel across the country, even though it may mean them having to go into a hospital somewhere else, where they may seed further infections? Do you want them to do that, or do you want them to stay put when they do not have local childcare, like around a quarter of parents?



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**The Prime Minister:** Yvette, I think you would have to look at each individual case. There were particular circumstances that my adviser explained, and I think what Jenny Harries was trying to say was that, where there are exceptional difficulties, people need to take account of them. Other than that, I don't really know what I can add.

Q24 **Yvette Cooper:** Here's the problem, Prime Minister. The reason you are ducking this—the reason you are not giving people a straight answer—is because you are trying to protect Dominic Cummings. The reason you have sent all your Ministers out to say fudgy things and unclear things is because you are trying not to incriminate Dominic Cummings and you do not want to apologise for him. The problem is that that means you are putting your political concerns ahead of clear public health messages to parents who have coronavirus. The consequence of putting your political concerns above the national interest is, in the words of public health advisers, that you are “trashing”—

**Chair:** Could we have a question?

**Yvette Cooper:** Let me put this to you as a precise question. On the way into this crisis, you were criticised for getting a whole series of messages and decisions wrong: on shaking hands; on business as usual; on letting Cheltenham go ahead—

**Chair:** Can we have a question, please?

**Yvette Cooper:** —a series of those things, and 40,000 people are dead. We need you to get this right now. So can you tell us: you have a choice between protecting Dominic Cummings and putting the national interest first—which will it be, Prime Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** I think my choice is the choice that the British people want us all to make, Yvette, and that is, as far as we possibly can, to lay aside party political point-scoring, and to put the national interest first, and to be very clear with the British public about what we want to do and how we want to take this country forward.

We come now to an important juncture; we are moving to step two of our road map. And I think that this conversation, to my mind, has illuminated why it is so important for us to move on, and be very clear with the British public about how we want to deal with that, and how we want to make progress. And, frankly, when they hear nothing but politicians squabbling and bickering, it is no wonder that they feel confused and bewildered.

It is much, much more important that we stress the vital messages: stay at home if you can; go to work if you must—although that will change, obviously, for some sectors as 1 June approaches, and then 15 June, when more non-essential retail comes on. We must have social distancing; it is absolutely vital. And really those messages need to be pumped out the whole time, by you, Yvette, just as much as me.

**Yvette Cooper:** Prime Minister, we would love to have clearer messages from you; I need you to give those clearer messages—

**Chair:** You have had a long time, Yvette; we must move on. Are there



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any further questions? I am obliged to ask the Committee if you want to ask about the Prime Minister's adviser; otherwise we are moving on. Simon Hoare—very brief, please.

Q25 **Simon Hoare:** I agree entirely about the seriousness of the situation, but I do not think anybody can understand why Mr Cummings is so pivotal to moving this country forward, dealing with coronavirus. This is now a distraction. People are very annoyed, Prime Minister. Is that on your radar?

**The Prime Minister:** I think, Simon, you have made that point several times now. My respectful point to you is, yes, I do understand people's feelings. I do understand why people feel such indignation about the whole business, and the pain of the whole business, of the lockdown, but I really also think that what they want now is for us to focus on them and their needs, rather than on a political ding-dong about what one adviser may or may not have done. And to repeat an important point, which I do not think you have acknowledged, a lot of the allegations that were made about that adviser were simply not correct. And I do not think that point has been sufficiently acknowledged.

**Chair:** We are moving on to science and health, unless anybody wants to carry on with that subject. Right—we are moving on to science and health. Greg Clark; we are now quite far behind, I am afraid.

Q26 **Greg Clark:** Prime Minister, good afternoon; it is good to see you back. You get a lot of scientific advice. Do you see it yourself?

**The Prime Minister:** Thank you, Greg; good to see you too. I do not actually read the scientific papers, except in exceptional circumstances, but what I do get is the direct digest from SAGE, which, as you know, is chaired by Sir Patrick Vallance and co-chaired by Chris Whitty. And they give me the cream of that advice.

Q27 **Greg Clark:** Okay—so you get a summary. From reading that advice, can you explain why we in this country have a policy of 2 metres social distancing when the World Health Organisation recommends 1 metre, and countries that have a very good track record in controlling covid—countries like Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia and Germany—specify either 1 metre or 1.5 metres?

**The Prime Minister:** You are making a very important point, one that I have made myself several times—many times—in the course of the debates that we have had.

Q28 **Greg Clark:** What was the advice from SAGE?

**The Prime Minister:** The advice from SAGE remains, at the moment, that there is a very considerable reduction in risk at 2 metres. My own hope—this is where I hope we can get—is that, as we make progress in getting the virus down and in reducing the incidence, we will be able to reduce that distance, which I think would be particularly valuable on transport and clearly in the hospitality sector.

Q29 **Greg Clark:** The virus is international. The virus does not recognise international boundaries. Science is international. Have you asked your



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advisers why our specification should be the highest in the world?

**The Prime Minister:** I have, actually.

Q30 **Greg Clark:** What was the answer?

**The Prime Minister:** Their answer is that that is what they feel is the right interval for us to protect each other.

Q31 **Greg Clark:** Did you ask why there is a difference?

**The Prime Minister:** We rely, and have done throughout, on the guidance we get from our advisers. That is what they think is appropriate at the moment, but that may evolve. As you know, SAGE has changed its advice, for instance, on face coverings.

Q32 **Greg Clark:** Advice needs to be interrogated and discussed, Prime Minister. Perhaps you could ask SAGE to review the 2-metre rule, in good time for shops and other places to consider their practice on 15 June, and publish what it says, because this has a massive impact on whether many workplaces can open. Will you make that commitment?

**The Prime Minister:** I can not only make that commitment—I can tell you that I have already done just that, so I hope we will make progress.

Q33 **Greg Clark:** Good. When contact tracing is under way, if you are phoned up and told to stay at home because you have come into contact with an infected person, is staying at home compulsory or can people use their judgment?

**The Prime Minister:** No, it's—we want people to understand that this is something that is not just good for them, because they will stop spreading the disease to those they love and know, but also good for the whole of society.

Q34 **Greg Clark:** Is it compulsory, or is it advisory?

**The Prime Minister:** We intend to make it absolutely clear to people that they must stay at home, but let me be clear—

Q35 **Greg Clark:** Is it a law, or is it advice?

**The Prime Minister:** We will be asking people to stay at home. If they do not follow that advice, we will consider what sanctions may be necessary—financial sanctions, fines or whatever.

Q36 **Greg Clark:** Enforced by the police or by civil authorities?

**The Prime Minister:** Whatever is appropriate.

Q37 **Greg Clark:** It starts on Monday, does it not?

**The Prime Minister:** No, because we are not bringing it—to begin with, we are asking people to do it as a matter of course if they are contacted by an NHS tracer. If you are contacted by an NHS tracer and told that you have been, for more than 15 minutes, less than 2 metres away from



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somebody who has tested positive for coronavirus, you should self-isolate. That is what we are saying.

Q38 **Greg Clark:** You “should”—it is advice.

**The Prime Minister:** You should. If people do not, as I say, we will consider bringing in financial sanctions—fines.

Q39 **Greg Clark:** Let me ask one wrap-up question. Do you have to talk to the contact tracer? Do you have an obligation to do that? Would it not be a good thing to be able to offer anyone who is contacted an immediate test, with rapid results—as conforms to international best practice, such as in South Korea—rather than advising them, as it seems, to lock themselves away for 14 days, not knowing whether they have tested positive?

**The Prime Minister:** Let us be clear. Thank you, Greg; that is an important point. Clearly, if you are asked to self-isolate and you develop coronavirus symptoms, you will of course have a test.

Q40 **Greg Clark:** But what if you do not have symptoms?

**The Prime Minister:** The difficulty with testing people who are asymptomatic is that they may very well have the disease but not test positive for it for a long time, and that can run right the way through, I am afraid, for quite a long period. That is the difficulty that we have here, Greg: just too many false negatives. A lot of people will listen to this and say—

Q41 **Greg Clark:** So it is scientific advice, not capacity, that is driving that. You have had advice that you should not do that on scientific grounds, rather than capacity grounds.

**The Prime Minister:** That is completely right. A lot of people listening to this will say—this is a big change, right, people need to listen to this and understand—“Hang on a mo’, you are telling me that if somebody from NHS test and trace contacts me and says I’m a contact of somebody who has coronavirus, I have to self-isolate for 14 days?” and I am afraid the answer to that is yes. Clearly, if they have a test and they have symptoms and they test positive, then the self-isolation ends after seven days, but I am afraid if you are asymptomatic—you do not have symptoms—then you have got to do it. People will say that this is a grave imposition; again, to get back to the conversation that we have been having throughout this session, is a huge imposition, but it will be on a very, very small minority of the population. I would just say to everybody that it is worth it, because that is the tool that other countries have used to unlock the prison and to make sure that we can go forward, so that captivity for a tiny minority for a short time will allow us gradually to release 66 million people from the current situation. So I do think it is the right way forward.

Q42 **Jeremy Hunt:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. Today’s announcement on track and trace could be an absolute game changer, but it is possible only because we have massively ramped up testing. Why did it take until April to introduce the 100,000 tests target, even though our first



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confirmed case was in January?

**The Prime Minister:** As you know, Jeremy, we faced several difficulties with this virus. First, this was a totally new virus and it had some properties that everybody was quite slow to recognise across the world. For instance, it is possible to transmit coronavirus when you are pre-symptomatic—when you do not have symptoms—and I do not think people understood that to begin with.

Q43 **Jeremy Hunt:** But what was the reason for the delay, Prime Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** Our testing operation, as you know, began much earlier—we did have a test, track and trace operation—but unfortunately we did not have the capacity in Public Health England. To be absolutely blunt, we did not have the enzymes, we did not have the test kits—we just did not have the volume, and nor did we have enough experienced trackers ready to mount the kind of operation that they did in some other eastern Asian countries, for instance. The brutal reality, Jeremy, is that this country did not learn the lessons of SARS or MERS, and we did not have a test operation ready to go on a scale that we needed. We now have that. As you will appreciate, during the peak of the epidemic, when the numbers of cases were running very high indeed, test, track and trace would not have been appropriate. It is now the appropriate solution.

Q44 **Jeremy Hunt:** Prime Minister, my question was really about why we waited from January to April before expanding that capacity. One of the consequences of that was that we could not test everyone who was being discharged from hospitals. Did you get any advice that doing that meant that we could risk spreading the virus into care homes?

**The Prime Minister:** No, and as you know a huge effort was made to try to protect care homes. Do not forget that, as Chris Hopson of NHS Providers has said, every discharge from the NHS into care homes was made by clinicians, and in no case was that done when people were suspected of being coronavirus victims. Actually, the number of discharges from the NHS into care homes went down by 40% from January to March, so it is just not true that there was some concerted effort to move people out of NHS beds into care homes. That is just not right.

Q45 **Jeremy Hunt:** No, but there is obviously risk if you cannot test people when they leave hospital. Countries like Germany insisted that care homes quarantined people arriving from hospital and we did not.

On to today's announcement, which is so important, you said that you want a world-beating system, and most people think that Korea and Taiwan are among the places that have done this best. In those countries, the test results are returned within 24 hours; with us, it is 48 hours—twice as long. That means that the people who are contacted because they have been near someone with coronavirus have longer to spread the virus to others. Why don't we get our test results back in 24 hours?

**The Prime Minister:** That is a very good question. Actually, we are reducing the time—the delay—on getting your test results back. I really



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pay tribute to Dido Harding and her team. The UK is now testing more people than any other country in Europe. She has got a staff now of 40,000 people, with 7,500 clinicians and 25,000 trackers in all, and they are rapidly trying to accelerate the turnaround time. I will send you the latest figures after this meeting, but we are reducing the delay the whole time. Most of them are within 48 hours; a chunk of them are already within 24 hours, and that chunk is growing.

**Q46** **Jeremy Hunt:** I understand that, but I have got three care homes, just in my constituency, that have had to wait more than a week to get their results back. Isn't the truth that turnaround time is just as important as the volume of tests? So why don't you, as Prime Minister, just say, "This is a public health emergency. I want all test results back within 24 hours"? That would galvanise the system and make the test and trace system work much more effectively.

**The Prime Minister:** We have done that. That is exactly what Dido—

**Q47** **Jeremy Hunt:** You have introduced a 24-hour target.

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, absolutely. That is her goal, and if you talk both to Dido and to Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, they would agree strongly with you that the quicker the turnaround time, the faster you can check whether someone actually has coronavirus and the more effective and the more effective your test, track and trace operation is going to be.

**Q48** **Jeremy Hunt:** When have you told them they have to meet that 24-hour target by?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not going to give you a deadline right now, Jeremy, because I have been forbidden from announcing any more targets and deadlines. I will—

**Q49** **Jeremy Hunt:** But give me a sense. Is it going to be in the next week or the next month? Are we talking weeks or months?

**The Prime Minister:** It is going to be as soon as possible.

**Q50** **Jeremy Hunt:** Weeks or months?

**The Prime Minister:** Let me—*[Interruption.]* If I could, I will just say one thing that might be of use to Jeremy and the Committee, to understand where we are with test and trace. I must be absolutely clear about this—I am not going to pretend to you, Jeremy, or to the Committee. What we will have tomorrow will be valuable—It will be useful; it will be a very important tool in our fight against coronavirus—but it will be getting steadily better, to become a truly world-beating test and trace operation in the course of the next days as we go through June. This has gone from a complete standing start to a huge operation. So I do not want to give you an exact deadline for when we will get down to 24 hours, but that is plainly the ambition and we will do it as soon as we can.

**Q51** **Jeremy Hunt:** A final brief question, Prime Minister. Like us, Canada, Israel and Singapore all have a lot of agency workers working in their



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care homes, and they have banned those agency workers from working in more than one care home because they do not want them spreading the virus from care home to care home. Will you look at doing the same thing here?

**The Prime Minister:** Not only that, but we have done that already. If you look at our care home action plan, we said that we would stop movement—the migration of workers—from one care home to the next, because clearly that is what was happening: you were seeing outbreak after outbreak because, particularly in chains of care homes, staff were moving from one to the next. A stop has been put to that, and that is why the number of outbreaks in care homes has gone down from being in the hundreds a few weeks ago to seven or eight a day today. That is why the number of deaths in care homes has come down so dramatically.

Look, I am not going to pretend that this has been anything other than a tragedy—an absolute tragedy what has happened in care homes—but the care home action plan, including the measure that you have just described, has already had a very, very powerful impact.

Q52 **Chair:** Can I just interject Prime Minister? What is causing the delays to tests, how are you resolving those problems and who is in charge of implementing that resolution?

**The Prime Minister:** Okay. The delays in testing are caused very largely by difficulties in the labs with actually producing the results in a speedy and effective way. We have had problems with some labs that I am not going to mention by name that have not—things have fallen over in their operations and they have not been able to get the results back fast enough. So we are working on all sorts of solutions, including batch testing and other faster methods of testing that I am sure the Committee are already familiar with—pregnancy-style tests and so on—in order to speed it up. There has been a host of technical problems, but notwithstanding those problems, the UK's testing capacity is now up at about 150,000—

**Chair:** That has been very helpful. We will stop there.

**The Prime Minister:** And we are going to go up to 200,000.

Q53 **Mr Betts:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. You have mentioned that the whole system of testing, tracking and tracing went from a standing start, but already in this country, at the beginning, we had a lot of highly qualified professionals called directors of public health, who are experts in the field of contacting people, tracking and tracing. Why were so many of them saying last week that their involvement in designing the system had been minimal?

**The Prime Minister:** That is one of the issues that I have raised repeatedly and has been raised repeatedly with me—a strong desire to have much more local expertise and use all the local knowledge far more effectively. One of the reasons why we decided it was at the heart of Dido's operation is the chief executive of Leeds council who, as I am sure



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you know, is helping to make sure that we are not trying to reinvent the wheel here. We are using local experts, people who understand their communities, as well as recruiting more trackers from around the country.

- Q54 **Mr Betts:** It seems to many people that the involvement locally was almost an afterthought. We are now going to have this grand national system. The Department of Health and Social Care is involved, Public Health England are involved, we have phone banks, and we will have an app eventually. How will the local arrangements that you have just described, the involvement of directors of public health, fit into that? Who in the end will be accountable for the whole system?

**The Prime Minister:** I will be accountable for everything, but the person—

- Q55 **Mr Betts:** So we can blame you for everything that goes wrong then, Prime Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** My experience is that it is very hard to avoid blame, and quite right too. Dido is leading it, and she is doing a very good job. I thank her and her team. They have gone from a standing start to 40,000 people.

- Q56 **Mr Betts:** Let's go on a little bit, because the Government have now announced that every area will have an outbreak control plan and an outbreak control committee who will be responsible for that plan. Precisely who are these committees? Who is going to form them? If there are going to be local lockdown measures, which have been referred to recently, will it be the local committees that decide on those and impose them?

**The Prime Minister:** No, obviously we will be working with the local outbreak committees and those responsible for dealing with whatever happens locally. We will clearly go through the local resilience forums, which are leading on this, but there will be strong directional effort and control from the joint biosecurity centre that we are now setting up. Members of the Committee will be familiar with this change. We are moving to a—we are going to have much more observation and detailed knowledge of what is happening—

- Q57 **Mr Betts:** So those local committees are responsible to the biosecurity committee at a national level.

**The Prime Minister:** That's it. The joint biosecurity centre will be looking at—for instance, the other day there was an outbreak in Weston-super-Mare, and we moved very quickly to close things down there to try to sort it out. That is the kind of whack-a-mole tactic that we are going to use as we keep driving the virus down and keep reducing the incidence. It is very important that we have a very sensitive test, track and trace operation in order to cope with local outbreaks.

- Q58 **Mr Betts:** Can I follow up on a question that Greg Clark asked earlier? I understand that there probably are long-standing sanctions for people who do not isolate with a disease which is notifiable under the public



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health rules. Directors of public health seem to understand that. But what is missing is that if someone is infected and then is asked for information about the people they have been in contact with, there are absolutely no sanctions if they refuse to provide that information. Is that not a major hole in the system that needs addressing?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, you are totally right that we are relying on people's public spiritedness and their willingness to co-operate to defeat the disease. In other areas—very delicate and sensitive areas—where people need to give details of their contacts, such as HIV transmission, it does work, so I am confident that it will work in this case.

Q59 **Mr Betts:** But if it does not work, will you look at sanctions? That may be something we need to do.

**The Prime Minister:** Obviously, we are relying very much on the common sense of the public to recognise the extreme seriousness of this. This is our way out. This is our way of defeating the virus and getting our country back on its feet, and I think people will want to work together—

Q60 **Mr Betts:** I think most people will; it is those who will not who we have to deal with, surely.

**The Prime Minister:** You are correct, and that is why I said what I said earlier to Greg—we will, of course, keep sanctions on the table, and as we develop the system, we will review constantly what kind of co-operation and compliance we are getting.

Q61 **Chair:** Point well made, Clive. Prime Minister, can you just explain who Dido is and what her role is?

**The Prime Minister:** Dido Harding is a senior executive in the NHS who has crossed over to work full time now on bringing together across Departments and all the institutions involved—Public Health England, care homes or whoever it happens to be—the test and trace operation. She is responsible for NHS test and trace. That is what is being launched this evening by Matt and goes live tomorrow.

**Chair:** Very good. We will now move on to the reopening of schools, with Robert Halfon.

Q62 **Robert Halfon:** Can you assure all those parents, children, teachers and support staff who are watching today that the phased school opening on 1 June is absolutely safe, is of minimal risk, that all the required testing, tracking and tracing will be given to teachers, staff and pupils, and that there will be the required PPE where it is needed? Is it still the Government's plan to have all primary school years going back a month before the summer holidays?

**The Prime Minister:** Those are some very important questions. Just to remind everybody, because not everybody will have clocked this yet, what we want from 1 June is for primary schools to begin gradually to go back—early years, reception, year 1 and year 6. We know we can do it in a safe, socially distanced way. That is what we want. We accept that not everybody will necessarily go back on day one, but we do expect people



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to return to school in those class groups. We do believe it is safe, provided everybody remembers the guidelines that we have set out and everybody understands the crucial things you have got to do, particularly maintaining social distance, washing your hands and, of course, self-isolating if you have symptoms. Those are the crucial things that you have got to do. They cannot be stressed often enough.

On your point about the rest of primary school, we want to keep that under review. We would like to do it if we can. It depends on our national success in keeping the disease under control and driving the incidence down, so we will continue to review it in accordance with the scientific advice.

- Q63 **Robert Halfon:** We know that roughly 86% of vulnerable pupils are not at school and learning, and a survey of 900 heads in England suggested that around 700,000 state school pupils are not doing any schoolwork. There is potentially a decade of educational poverty in the offing, and possibly a safeguarding crisis, so will you support a catch-up premium, supported by a volunteer army of retired teachers, graduates and charities, alongside the opening of summer schools to help those left-behind children to catch up with their education and get much needed pastoral and wellbeing support?

**The Prime Minister:** The short answer is that I want to support any measures we can take to level up. You know what we want to do in this Government. There is no doubt that huge social injustice is taking place at the moment because some kids are going to have better access to tutoring and to schooling at home, and other kids are not going to get nearly as much, and that is not fair. That is one of the reasons why we need to get schools back. I think that is something that people in this country do understand—they understand the basic social injustice there. You have lots of good ideas there—the catch-up fund, making a particular effort to tackle the needs of disadvantaged kids. Don't forget that we are already making sure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds get laptops, tablets and routers where necessary, but I agree with you that there is a lot more that needs to be done.

- Q64 **Robert Halfon:** Apprenticeship starts have fallen by 7% on last year, and we know that a significant number of apprentices are being furloughed or made redundant. We are in danger of destroying our dream of building an apprenticeship nation. Will you consider introducing an apprentice guarantee, offering every young person from the age of 16 to 25 a guaranteed apprenticeship, provided they get the qualifications, from level 2 right up to degree level?

**The Prime Minister:** All I will say to you, Rob, is that I totally agree that apprenticeships can play a huge part in getting people back on to the jobs market and into work, and we will look at anything to help people. It is going to be a difficult time, but there are also great opportunities to give people skills now that they perhaps need and have not been getting over the last few years, so we are going to focus on that as well.

- Q65 **Robert Halfon:** But why not give them an apprenticeship guarantee?



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There will be a lot of young people needing skills and jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus.

**The Prime Minister:** We will be doing absolutely everything we can to get people into jobs, and I will look at the idea of an apprenticeship guarantee. I suppose it is something that we would have to work with employers to deliver. We would have to think about the funding of that, but this is a Government that has done some pretty astonishing and creative things with helping business in the last few months, and that is the kind of thing we could well consider. We are going to need to take exceptional steps to help our young people into work, and we will.

**Robert Halfon:** Finally—

**Chair:** Very brief, please.

Q66 **Robert Halfon:** I have my question which I have been guaranteed by you, Chair. Cambridge University has become the first university to announce that it is moving all its lectures online until summer 2021, but another university—Nottingham Trent, an award-winning university—is going to have a blended mix of campus and online learning. Should higher education follow the example of Cambridge or of Nottingham Trent? Finally, should every student who is working in the NHS during the coronavirus have their tuition fees reimbursed this academic year, at the very least?

**The Prime Minister:** Rob, you are piling on some questions here. On your final one, I will come back to you—on students who are working in the NHS. I'm sorry; we will give you an answer as soon as we possibly can. On your point about Cambridge and Nottingham Trent universities, obviously, I think it is a matter for universities, but clearly—I think the implication of your question is that face-to-face tuition is preferable, right? I hope that all universities understand that and see that that is also important for their students and for social justice.

Q67 **Stephen Timms:** Can I pick up that social justice point and ask a question about a couple in my constituency? They both work, they have two children, and the husband's employer did not put him on the job retention scheme, so he has zero income. His wife is still working, but her income is less than their household rent. They have leave to remain in the UK, but no recourse to public funds, so they cannot get any help at all. Isn't it wrong that a hard-working, law-abiding family like that is being forced into destitution by the current arrangements?

**The Prime Minister:** Hang on, Stephen. Why aren't they eligible for universal credit, employment and support allowance or any of the other benefits—

Q68 **Stephen Timms:** That is a very good question. It is because they have no recourse to public funds; that is a condition that is attached to their leave to remain. They have been here for years, their children have been born in the UK, but because for a 10-year period they have no recourse to public funds, at the moment they can get no help at all.



**The Prime Minister:** Where are they actually from?

**Stephen Timms:** The couple I am thinking of are from Pakistan, but it applies to anyone from outside the UK.

**The Prime Minister:** And they cannot get furloughed—obviously not. I am going to have to come back to you on that, Stephen. Clearly people who have worked hard for this country, who live and work here, should have support of one kind or another, but you have raised a very, very important point if a condition of their leave to remain is that they should have no recourse to public funds. I will find out how many there are in that position and we will see what we can do to help.

**Stephen Timms:** I would be most grateful. The Children's Society said, I think two weeks ago, that there were at least 100,000 children in families in exactly that position. They have leave to remain, they are law abiding and hard working and they have no recourse to public funds, and many of them can get no help at all at the moment.

Q69 **Chair:** We look forward to a letter on this matter, Prime Minister.

**The Prime Minister:** You will get it.

Q70 **Stephen Timms:** Can I raise a separate point, picking up on Robert's point about a proposed apprenticeship guarantee? I just want to point to the success of the future jobs fund after the last crash in supporting young people back to work. I wonder whether you would agree that we are going to need some pretty radical measures to tackle unemployment after the crisis, particularly to support young people, who I think everyone is suggesting will find it particularly hard to get into work.

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, and that is why I think Rob's idea of this apprenticeship guarantee is so attractive. What we have done is put our arms around every worker and helped them to keep their job, but businesses may need support in the coming months, as they get back on their feet, to take people on. We will need to think about how to help them. At the same time—let's face it, this country does have a skills deficit; we do still have a productivity gap. This might be the moment, Stephen, when we really start to try to tackle that and use this crisis to address some of these issues. I can assure you that the Chancellor and I and everybody are looking at this stuff very closely and will be wanting to come forward in June or early July with much more about how we get employment going again and how we get the economy restarted, but for now, it is very important that we focus on defeating this virus.

Q71 **Stephen Timms:** After 2010, the last crash, we had an ambitious large-scale employment support programme. Of course, for the last few years unemployment has been low and employment support has been much more modest. I wonder whether you recognise—perhaps this is what you have just been suggesting—that we are again going to need a much bigger employment support programme after the crisis than we have had in the last few years.



**The Prime Minister:** I think it is very likely, Stephen, and we have done some things that I think have been right and overdue. Lifting LHA, the local housing allowance, up to 30% of the local market rent was, I think, the right thing to do, and that helps a lot of people. What we have done with the universal credit has also been important. But the challenge now is going to be about getting the economy moving again and creating high-class, good jobs for the whole country. My mantra remains that the way to do that is with fantastic infrastructure, better education, better skills, and technology. We are going to stick ruthlessly to that. Indeed, I have said this before to Conservative colleagues, but I will say it to everybody on this Committee: we are going to double down on that programme. We want to intensify that.

- Q72 **Stephen Timms:** It is going to require support for people to get into employment as well as making sure that there are jobs. The point made forcefully to our Committee recently has been that it takes a good year to get an employment support programme into its stride; do you agree that it is urgent to get a programme planned and under way?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, but do not forget, Stephen, what HMRC and the Government have already done at incredible speed in getting the furlough programme going. Nobody though thought we could do that thing so fast, but they did and they did it very effectively. One of the ways in which this country is getting easier, as it were, to help is that we have so much more data—we understand where people are and what the problems are. That is one of the things that we are using to tackle this epidemic, so I hope that we will be able to be very fast in dealing with the economic issues on the spot, as we are trying to deal with the health and medical issues right now.

- Q73 **Caroline Nokes:** We have heard about the phased school opening, and that is going to happen at a similar time to the opening up of the retail sector, where we know that nearly 60% of employees are women. Whose advice have you taken, Prime Minister, on how that phasing and the availability of childcare might impact women's ability to get back to work?

**The Prime Minister:** I think your question, Caroline, is directed at whether or not we have sufficient female representation at the top of Government helping us to inform these decisions, and I really think we have. The head of policy in No. 10 is Munira Mirza; the election manifesto on which we both fought successfully was written by two women; and the most important appointments we have made just in the last couple of weeks—whether it is Dido Harding or Kate Bingham, who is running the vaccines operation—are also women—

- Q74 **Caroline Nokes:** Can I just interrupt you there, Prime Minister? The EHRC have said that they have been ignored by Downing Street and that you have not listened to any of their advice on the unequal impact of covid. Which experts are you listening to on the impact that this virus has had, particularly on female employment?

**The Prime Minister:** Well, we are—there is a general study being conducted across Whitehall about the inequalities aspects of covid, and



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that will be reporting to me. There is a study on the medical inequalities that Professor Fenton is producing, and that should report by the end of this month.

**Q75 Caroline Nokes:** The Institute for Fiscal Studies said that women are more likely to be furloughed and more likely to be in sectors that have been shut down. They are also worried about the availability of childcare and their employers making decisions for the future based on which employees might have those challenges. You have said that you hoped employers would be considerate, but that does not give any legal protection. Do you think optimism is good enough?

**The Prime Minister:** No, I think it is very important that people are given the protections that they need. It is true that more women have been furloughed, but it is also true that the furlough scheme is more generous than virtually any other scheme around the world. I cannot think of any other country where people have been given 80% of their wages at up to £2,500 per month in the way that the UK has done. We will continue to look after people and to put our arms round our workforce to help them back into work.

Your point about the particular vulnerability of female workers is very good, because female workers—women workers—I think they have been harder hit by this thing, because very often, they have jobs, particularly lower paid jobs, that make it more difficult for them to work from home. That is why we need to get this thing moving if we possibly can, keep fighting the virus, keep defeating it, and help people get back into work.

**Q76 Caroline Nokes:** We went into this crisis with record female employment. That is a fantastic achievement, but in order to come out of it with women being able to go back into work, we are going to need a childcare sector that is functioning. What specific thought have you given to additional assistance to the childcare sector?

**The Prime Minister:** Well, as you know, we have already invested considerably in supporting childcare, and we will do whatever it takes to help women to get back into work. Look, I agree with you: childcare is absolutely critical for the success of our economy.

**Q77 Caroline Nokes:** Specifically, how has the Government Equalities Office contributed to the decisions about which parts of the economy should open up first?

**The Prime Minister:** We take every decision with full consideration for the equalities impacts, as you would expect any Government Department or any Government to do these days.

**Q78 Caroline Nokes:** Thank you for that. Prime Minister, you commented earlier that you felt there had been enough female voices in the decision-making processes. Why have they not been more visible?

**The Prime Minister:** I don't think I said "enough" by the way. I just said that there had been a lot. I think that it is certainly true that I would have liked to have had more female representation in the press conferences so



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far. We have had Jenny Harries, who has been mentioned, and Priti has done a few. We will do our best, Caroline. What can I say?

**Caroline Nokes:** You made the distinction, Prime Minister—

**The Prime Minister:** Dido will be appearing this afternoon.

Q79 **Chair:** How much do you think having women in the room when decisions are being made changes the nature of those decisions?

**The Prime Minister:** I think it can make a huge difference—a huge difference, to be honest. That may sound like a vaguely sexist thing to say, but it is very important.

Q80 **Caroline Nokes:** Prime Minister, you made the distinction between there being a lot of women and enough women. How many is enough?

**The Prime Minister:** Oh boy, that is a question on which I am not confident to pronounce.

Q81 **Caroline Nokes:** Is it not 50%?

**Chair:** It's not a joking matter though, is it?

**The Prime Minister:** It's not. All I would say, Caroline, is that it is incredibly important to us as Conservatives. We have more—50% would be great. We have large numbers of female MPs of great talent, including yourself, in the House of Commons now—far more than, I believe, we ever had. And never forget, it is only the Conservative party that has produced two female Prime Ministers. Maybe you will be the third.

Q82 **Chair:** We are moving on to the final group of questions. In many respects, the economy is the most important issue, because that is what is going to make the difference between people living in misery or prosperity as we come out of this, so I very much hope you will afford us a few extra minutes so that we can get these very important questions in. I will be extremely grateful to you.

**The Prime Minister:** Yes.

**Mel Stride:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. In your response to Stephen Timms, in terms of addressing the importance of getting unemployment down as we come out of this crisis, you referred to your mantra and to doubling down on spending on training, apprenticeships, infrastructure and so on, all of which I think are important, incidentally. You have also said in the past that austerity is not something that we are going to get involved with, and yet we know that the structural deficit will have increased very significantly as we come through the other side of this crisis. While we may be able to borrow at low rates for some time, that will be predicated on a clear and credible plan that the markets believe for getting that structural deficit down. Given your stance on spending, that means significant increases in the overall tax burden in this country, does it not?



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**The Prime Minister:** I understand exactly where you are going with your question, Mel, but I think you are going to have to wait, if you can, until the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, brings forward his various proposals. You make an important point about the potential this country has to borrow at good rates and to invest in infrastructure, among other things.

Q83 **Mel Stride:** We did not have to wait when it came to basically saying that there will be no return to austerity—in other words, that spending at pre-crisis levels will be broadly maintained. What is your statement now on taxation? Is it that we will have to wait and see what the numbers look like, or can you give a similar assurance that, broadly speaking, taxes will remain at the same kind of level?

**The Prime Minister:** I would share your instincts to try to keep taxes as low as we conceivably can, consistent with our desire to invest in our fantastic public services. Look, I do not want to anticipate now what we are going to do on our economic package; that is for a bit later on.

If I may, Bernard said just now that the most important thing was the economy. Yes, of course, but we will not have a strong economy unless we can get coronavirus under control, continue with our road map and defeat it. That, I think, is what we should focus on right now.

**Mel Stride:** Can I zero in on one particular group who are being particularly damaged by the economy, whom Rob has already referred to: young people. There is no doubt that they are bearing the brunt in terms of job insecurity, job losses and the effect on their lifestyles, living standards and so on. We need to do a lot, as you recognised, to support them as we come through the crisis. At the same time, to go back to spending, one of the big spending commitments you have in the manifesto is the triple lock around pensions. As an MP who represents an elderly constituency, if I may put it that way, I think that is very important. Can you today give us a categorical assurance that that particular manifesto commitment will be met?

**The Prime Minister:** We are going to meet all our manifesto commitments. Unless I specifically tell you otherwise, Mel, the manifesto you and I fought on is—it is an important point. We will not be blown off course. We will deliver 40 new hospitals. We are well on track to delivering 20,000 more police officers. We will recruit 50,000 more nurses—and heaven knows, the need for those nurses has never been more apparent to our country. We are going to get on with our programme. We have a fantastic agenda for this country of uniting and levelling up. What that means is investing in—

Q84 **Mel Stride:** I am sorry to interrupt, but I want to keep it to tax. Just so that we are very clear: no rises in income tax, VAT or national insurance.

**The Prime Minister:** When you were doing your job in the Treasury—you did it so well—I do not think you would have made any kind of fiscal commitments in this kind of Committee. You know where my instincts lie, and they are very much the same as yours.



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**Q85 Mel Stride:** I was picking up on us meeting our manifesto commitments, which include no increase in the rates of those particular taxes. They are very broad based and heavy lifting, and that is quite a commitment to stick to if you are also not prepared to bear down on spending to at least some degree.

A final question. I think that broadly the Chancellor has done a very good job of stepping in and supporting the economy through this very difficult period with the furlough scheme and so on, but inevitably by moving at such scale and at such pace, there have been gaps. One of those relates to the self-employed who work through their own company and take self-employment income by way of a dividend. That currently is not being allowed to contribute to the assessment of the amount of furlough they should qualify for. HMRC say it is too complicated to do that. I suspect it is one of those areas where a hand, such as yours, reaching down from the top could slice through the Gordian knot. Are you prepared personally to have a look at this and potentially help hundreds of thousands of hard-working self-employed people with their furlough?

**The Prime Minister:** Thanks, Mel. I really do understand the needs of the self-employed in this time; it is tough. You are making a very good point about those who get income by way of a dividend. We will look at whether that can be set against the furloughs, which I think is what you are proposing.

Again, I think that when you look in the round at what the UK is doing to look after our employees, and self-employed, it is a pretty awesome package, and we mean it. But this particular extra cash, I will have to discuss with my friend next door.

**Mel Stride:** I am grateful. Thank you, Prime Minister.

**Q86 Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, how much of the British economy do you expect to end up in some form of state ownership as a consequence of Project Birch?

**The Prime Minister:** I cannot give you a figure on that, Darren, but suffice it to say that, getting back to Mel, we are going through quite extraordinary economic times, and—

**Q87 Darren Jones:** I understand, Prime Minister; I do not want you to repeat the answers you have given to my colleague, Mr Stride, because of time. But to maybe extend the question for you, could you give us an idea about how the Government will prioritise support across different sectors? Will Airbus or McLaren, for example, get different support to, say, the hospitality and tourism sectors, or will they all get the support that they need?

**The Prime Minister:** We will do, Darren, whatever is appropriate to each sector—

**Q88 Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, what is “appropriate”? That is my question.

**The Prime Minister:** I cannot give you a hierarchy.



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Q89 **Darren Jones:** Okay. My second question, Prime Minister: at what level of unemployment do you think it is right for the Government to intervene to provide pay or secure work for people after furlough payments have come to an end?

**The Prime Minister:** We are going to do everything we can, Darren, to get everybody back into work.

Q90 **Darren Jones:** Thank you for that answer. And to build on Mr Stride's question, the self-employment income support scheme comes to an end this weekend, while furlough for employed workers continues until October. Why is that?

**The Prime Minister:** As I think the Chancellor has said when we announced the scheme for self-employed people, we will keep it under review and we will do what we can—

Q91 **Darren Jones:** But Prime Minister, it is this weekend—it is this weekend—that that income gets cut off. People will have a lack of income from next week.

**The Prime Minister:** Do not forget that self-employed people already have the access to bounce back loans, and I think that the last figures I saw were that £15 billion has been lent on the bounce back loans, income tax payments can be deferred until next year, and people are of course, eligible, for all sorts of other Government support, including the more generous universal credit and other things that I have already mentioned.

Q92 **Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, universal credit is not "generous" and it is unfortunate that you do not have an answer for those in self-employment whose income will be ending this weekend.

Prime Minister, these questions were trying to get an idea of the scope of the Government's ambition for supporting businesses and the economic recovery, and I am afraid that your answers have not been particularly instilling of confidence. Businesses, workers, unions and consumers will need to see that from you in order for them to return comfortably to work, school or the high street. Will you be bringing forward a full economic recovery package to this Committee and to Parliament before the summer recess?

**The Prime Minister:** I must say that I respectfully disagree with what you said about this Government's economic package for this country. I do not think that there is any other country that has done anything like the furlough scheme. I think that even your colleagues on the Labour Benches would accept that it is generous and it is right. And the short answer to your question is, yes, we will be bringing a full post-coronavirus economic recovery package to you and to everybody else in Parliament.

Q93 **Darren Jones:** We look forward to that, Prime Minister. And just to clarify, I was not criticising the economic package; I was just highlighting the lack of confidence from the public in the Government in lifting the lockdown restrictions.

My last question, very briefly, Chair: earlier in the session, Prime



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Minister, you said to my colleagues that the allegations against Mr Cummings were untrue. Could you set out for this Committee which allegations specifically were untrue?

**The Prime Minister:** I have gone into that before and I really have nothing to add on what I have previously said.

Q94 **Darren Jones:** You did not answer the question today though, Prime Minister, about which allegations are untrue. Would you like to take this opportunity to do so?

**The Prime Minister:** I will tell you why I do not want to go back into that now. As I have said repeatedly to other distinguished members of this Committee, although I understand people's frustration and indignation with the whole business—believe me, I do—it is my strong belief that what the country wants is for us to be focusing on how to go forward on the test and trace scheme that we are announcing today, and on how we are going to protect their jobs and livelihoods, and defeat this virus. That is where the energies of all politicians of all parties should now be directed.

Q95 **Darren Jones:** Thank you, Prime Minister. I am grateful for your commitment to bring that post-covid economic package to this Committee before the summer recess. We look forward to seeing it.

**The Prime Minister:** I don't think you will get it exclusively, Darren.

**Darren Jones:** That is what you said, Prime Minister. It is on the record. We look forward to seeing it.

**The Prime Minister:** As Members of the House of Commons, you will get it. I am not promising a world scoop to the Liaison Committee.

**Chair:** Well done, Darren. Thank you for your questions.

**The Prime Minister:** No, no, no, Darren.

Q96 **Huw Merriman:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. With regard to quarantine for those coming into the UK from 8 June, can I ask you this? Why now, when we are easing the lockdown and other countries are ending quarantine, and why not when we entered into lockdown?

**The Prime Minister:** Second point first. The reason we did not do it then is that the scientific advice was very clear that it would make no difference, or vanishingly little difference, to the arrival of the epidemic. It might delay it by a bit, but it would still come. The reason for doing it now is that, across the world, we are seeing infection rates come down. They are coming down here in this country, and what we do not want to see is reinfection from abroad. We think that a sensible quarantine scheme can help to prevent that, and that is what we are going to do from 8 June.

Q97 **Huw Merriman:** Prime Minister, many have commented that a sensible regime would look at the countries and their R rate. If it is below ours, there should be no need for quarantine. While that may not be possible for 8 June, will it be possible for the next three-week period—29 June—to



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allow those buying cheaper flights for their summer holidays, which have gone on sale today, to be removed from the threat of quarantine?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, absolutely, Huw. We want to make sure we use the three-week reviews to be sensible. We want to drive the R down as fast as we can in this country, and have as sensible a quarantine scheme as possible to keep flows as generous as we can.

Q98 **Huw Merriman:** What will have to change between now and 29 June for these air bridges to be accepted?

**The Prime Minister:** We will have to agree them with the other countries concerned, and we will also have to make progress in tackling the disease. We will have to have evidence that the other countries are in at least a good a position as we are.

Q99 **Huw Merriman:** That looks positive. What looks negative are those workers in the aviation sector. British Airways workers, many of whom will be in your constituency, are under threat not only of losing their jobs, but if they retain them having their terms and conditions slashed. Prime Minister, why is the furlough scheme called the job retention scheme when companies like BA can put their employees on furlough and then put them under threat of redundancy at the same time? Can this be changed?

**The Prime Minister:** To be perfectly frank—I will not go into individual companies—I am concerned about the way some companies are treating their workforce. You are raising a very important point, Huw. This country is nothing without its workforce—its labour. We have to look after people properly, and I am well aware of some of the issues that are starting to arise. People should not be using furlough cynically to keep people on their books and then get rid of them. We want people back in jobs. We want this country back on its feet. That is the whole point of the furlough scheme.

Q100 **Huw Merriman:** You will be aware that Willie Walsh, the chief executive of IAG, has tried for years to slash the terms and conditions of his staff and has failed because the staff have had enough power. They do not have the power now. Is there something that Government or Parliament can do to step in and stop this action before it occurs?

**The Prime Minister:** I am aware of this issue, and we are actively looking at what we can do.

**Huw Merriman:** I am grateful; thank you.

**Chair:** The Chair of the Public Accounts Committee has a supplementary question.

Q101 **Meg Hillier:** Prime Minister, you have been very clear throughout that you want to be focusing on the agenda. You have said that you want to be very clear about what you want to do, that you want to stress the vital message to stay at home if you can, and that it is vital for the economy to get back up and running. Are you concerned that the message during



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lockdown was so unclear that your own adviser did the right thing but the rest of us did not understand what we could do?

**The Prime Minister:** No, Meg, I think that the message during lockdown was very clear. People who had the virus, including my adviser, isolated for 14 days. People stayed at home, and as a result—

Q102 **Meg Hillier:** You say that, but we have all been contacted by many people who have been living in very difficult circumstances who did not know that they could do what your adviser did. If that is the level of clarity of the message, are you not concerned that, going forward, this will cause a real problem as you expect the economy to get back up and running?

**The Prime Minister:** No. I think that the most important thing now is for everybody to focus on the next steps and look at the test and trace scheme. It probably will not affect you—you probably will not be contacted. But if you are contacted and told that you have been in contact with someone—

**Meg Hillier:** That is a different thing. That is not really answering my question, so I will go back to the Chair.

**The Prime Minister:** If you are saying that the message was so unclear or is so unclear, I really dispute that. I am looking at the figures every day. We are seeing continual compliance of a fantastic level by the British public because they understand—we all understand—that defeating this virus requires common sense, and it is working. It was thanks to the British public working together that we prevented the overwhelming of the NHS. I was looking back at my notes for early March. We were terrified that we were going to run out of ventilators and the NHS would collapse. That did not happen because people followed the advice—

**Meg Hillier:** My question was about the clarity of messaging going forward.

**Chair:** I think you have made your point, Meg.

Yvette, if you have one sentence, I will forgive you.

Q103 **Yvette Cooper:** I have a very quick follow-up to the question from Huw Merriman about the decision not to have quarantine at the borders in the early stages of the crisis. We heard from Patrick Vallance, who said that many cases came in from Italy and Spain during that period, and we were told by Professor Wilder-Smith that between 1,000 and 10,000 people with coronavirus came in during that period. You still have not published the scientific advice that you were given for that decision. Will you now publish that advice please?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, and I think what Patrick said is that all the advice from SAGE is going to be published, including the SAGE minutes. I go back to what I said in answer to Huw about the decisions going into the epidemic. On quarantine and closing borders, do not forget that Italy closed its border completely to China and yet had an appalling outbreak.



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Our advice was that it would achieve very little by way of epidemiological protection, we could only delay and that there were other reasons why it was essential—

**Yvette Cooper:** Would not delay have been a good thing?

Q104 **Chair:** I am sorry, Yvette: would you like to finish that point, Prime Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. There were reasons, for instance, for repatriating UK nationals and for making sure that we had access to medical supplies from overseas, we needed to keep aviation going. But people will study all these decisions—I am sure they will—and maybe they will find fault with them, but I can tell you that they were taken in good faith, with the intention to defeat the virus and save lives and on the best possible scientific advice.

Q105 **Chair:** How will quarantining not retard the recovery of the economy?

**The Prime Minister:** I hope it will not retard the recovery of the economy by helping to prevent reinfection, which could lead to a second outbreak and the R going over 1 again, in such a way as to do serious economic damage to necessitate another lockdown. That is the logic.

Q106 **Chair:** But you understand the conflict. May I just raise two points from absent colleagues? Obviously we had far more demand to be in this meeting than we could accommodate. Julian Knight, the Chairman of the DCMS Committee, is particularly concerned about the hospitality industry and charities, which we have not had time to address. What can you say about the hospitality industry and charities?

**The Prime Minister:** On hospitality, Julian should know that we are really trying to go as fast as we can. It is very difficult to bring forward hospitality measures in a way that involves social distancing, but I am much more optimistic about that than I was, and I think that we may be able to do things faster than I had previously thought. From memory, we put in £750 million to support the charitable sector during what is obviously a very tough time, and we will be trying to help them.

Q107 **Chair:** The Chair of the Defence Committee laments the sense that there is no capable HQ for this crisis where, I would suggest, there needs to be constant reviewing and learning on a comprehensive scale. It seems to take a long time for lessons to be learned and things to be changed because such an HQ does not exist. What would you say to that?

**The Prime Minister:** I do not agree with that. What we now have here in No. 10 is a covid response operation led by Simon Case, a very distinguished civil servant who I am sure will be familiar to the Committee. He is looking at not just the health aspects but the economic recovery aspects, bringing it together across Whitehall.

Obviously, we have a structure, as you will understand, with the various ministerial groups that work towards the decisions that we take. Every morning there is a meeting here, chaired by me. We have all the key



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players. We look at the data for the day. We work out where we are and what needs to be done that day. We share it with Cabinet colleagues when we need to get to a decision. If Cabinet approves it, that then goes to the devolved Administrations and to the Opposition parties, with whom we have been working very closely. Once we have all got to a place where we are confident that we are in the right place, we go public with it.

Tomorrow, I am hoping that we will get to a state where we can announce further steps forward—further measures in step 2 of the road map. You have heard a bit already about retail and schools. We hope there will be a little bit more to come, but it all depends on fighting the virus, following our common sense and making sure that we stay alert. Everybody knows what the critical things are. We cannot take these steps forward if the infection rates start to go up again and if the R goes up again—I think everybody has got that.

**Q108 Chair:** Thank you, Prime Minister, for taking so many questions. We have covered quite a broad waterfront, including your track and trace proposals. The salient points that I would take away are about speeding up testing, educational inequalities arising from the covid crisis, the unequal effects of the crisis on women—particularly women with children—and the dividends point raised by the Chancellor, which seems to be a lacuna in the business support package.

**The Prime Minister:** Raised by Mel.

**Chair:** Yes, indeed. Did I say somebody else? I apologise.

**The Prime Minister:** You promoted him to Chancellor. But anyway—

**Q109 Chair:** Well, I am sorry. I think this all underlines how this has been a great benefit for the public to understand what is going on and to see Parliament holding you to account on these matters. I really do think it would be of benefit if we could see you again before the summer recess.

**The Prime Minister:** I knew you were going to say that—I could see you working yourself up to saying it. I am going to repeat the answer I gave at the very beginning, which is that we are working flat out to defeat coronavirus and get our country back on its feet. I have enjoyed this session, difficult though some of the questions have been, and think it is very important for us as parliamentarians to share ideas and discuss things together in the way that we have in the last 90 minutes or so. The trouble is, it does take a huge amount of sherpa time—preparation time—but we will do what we can.

**Chair:** I should just point out that the questions on which you hesitated and decided to go away and think were some of the most positive answers you gave, in some respects. That is where we want to help. I hope you will come back soon.

**The Prime Minister:** Okay. Thank you very much.

**Chair:** I thank my colleagues for being very disciplined and so helpful in



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this session.