HOUSE OF LORDS

Liaison Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Special inquiry committee proposal—The use of artificial intelligence in weapon systems

Monday 28 November 2022

4.10 pm

Members present: Lord Gardiner of Kimble (The Chair); Lord Bradley; The Earl of Courtown; Baroness Coussins; Lord Judge; Lord Kennedy of Southwark; Baroness Scott of Needham Market; Lord Taylor of Holbeach; Baroness Walmsley.

Evidence Session No. 5 Heard in Private Questions 1 - 5

Witness

I: Lord Clement-Jones.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence.

Examination of witness

Lord Clement-Jones.

Q1 **The Chair:** Good afternoon, Lord Clement-Jones. Thank you so much for joining this meeting of the Liaison Committee. We would love you to give us about two to three minutes on your proposal, which will be followed by questions from us.

Lord Clement-Jones: Thank you, Chair. First, good afternoon and thank you for shortlisting this proposal for a special inquiry committee on the use of artificial intelligence in weapons systems. Professor Stuart Russell, who recently gave us a lecture on AI in the Lords, said in his 2021 Reith lectures that "The inevitable endpoint is that autonomous weapons become cheap, selective weapons of mass destruction". Clearly, this would be a disaster for international security. It is already highly topical, as allegedly autonomous Iranian and Turkish drones are being deployed on the battlefield.

Such a committee would need to explore a number of key areas. I will not go through all of them, but they include: what a truly autonomous weapon is; what is technologically feasible; scenarios for their use; the risks of their permitted use; the moral and ethical principles that should apply; whether there should always be a human in control and what that means; how the use of autonomous weapons systems conflicts with our civil aspirations for the development of ethical AI; what legal principles already apply, or should, and where they fit within current UK and NATO defence policy and strategy; and whether an international limitation proliferation agreement should be reached, similar to those on nuclear and biological weapons.

Such an inquiry would make very good use of the diverse insight, knowledge, experience and expertise of Members of the House, in that complex political, legal, ethical, scientific, technical, military and industrial issues are involved, which have strategic international relations implications—precisely the kind of area where the Lords have shown and, in this case, could and should show leadership.

To date, no Select Committee, whether of the Lords or Commons, has focused specifically on the military application of AI, although the Government have now published their *Defence Artificial Intelligence Strategy*. It would complement the work of Commons departmental Select Committees and add great value in cutting across departmental boundaries to examine all these various aspects, especially across the MoD, the FCDO, the MoJ and the Attorney-General, and BEIS, DCMS and the Cabinet Office, all of which have data, AI and digital policy responsibilities and technical capabilities. Also included would be agencies and institutes such as the Office for Artificial Intelligence, the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, the Alan Turing Institute and the Defence Artificial Intelligence Centre, not to mention RUSI and other overseas players such as the Red Cross.

Although complex, these are readily identifiable issues. I am confident that a special inquiry would be capable of being confined to one year. This is

essentially unfinished business. The AI Select Committee that I chaired, itself a special inquiry, did not look specifically at the military and ethical considerations of lethal AI, instead noting that this area merits a committee of its own. I hope that is exactly what the Liaison Committee will agree to, so that we can take this important issue forward.

Q2 **The Chair:** Thank you for that very succinct introduction. I wondered about the use of the phrase "weapon systems" compared with "in defence". Your proposal is specifically for "weapon systems", and you use the phrase deliberately rather than the somewhat broader "in defence". Should the committee infer anything from the distinction between the two?

Lord Clement-Jones: I am very mindful of the point about trying to complete the inquiry within a year. Logistics areas are much more difficult. There are many differing views about the benefits of AI in logistics, and I think the moral, ethical and legal issues focus very heavily on the weapons aspects.

Q3 **Baroness Coussins:** One of the reasons why I am very keen on this proposal is that it seems a bit like the online safety issue—an area where there is a regulatory vacuum and the UK already has a foot in the door of policy leadership. Do you see this inquiry being able to make proposals about legislation which would have a global as well as national impact?

Lord Clement-Jones: I very much do. The UK has been a rather reluctant player on the international stage. There is a body called the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, of which the UK is a member, and we signed up to a very vague declaration this October. We have gradually been taken forward—not quite kicking and screaming, but we are by no means a leader in this area. If we had a robust look at this and came to some fairly firm conclusions—although I am not predicating the outcome—the UK would be able to play a much more effective leadership role on the international stage.

Q4 **Lord Judge:** I am slightly concerned that we will have an overlap between what you have proposed, which I understand, and the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, which is looking at the governance of AI, and our own International Relations and Defence Committee, which is looking at the issues raised by the defence Command Paper. Tell me that I am wrong or that my concerns should be allayed.

Lord Clement-Jones: I would not dream of saying that you are wrong, but the whole purpose of this special inquiry is to focus. I chaired a fairly broad special inquiry on the implications of AI in society, and of course there is other work going on—the Government are producing an AI governance White Paper, and I have just given written evidence to the Science and Technology Committee on the broad issue of AI governance—but I think lethal autonomous weapons are sui generis. They are a different and much more difficult area that needs its own inquiry, as we said in our original Select Committee. In focusing on these weapons, we would look particularly at their international implications. We can look at AI governance to some extent as UK plc, but we certainly cannot do so for lethal autonomous weapons.

Q5 **Baroness Walmsley:** You referred to unfinished business. To what extent do you think the topic would be finished at the end of 10 months? Is the committee more likely to propose what needs to be watched in an ongoing manner?

Lord Clement-Jones: The absolute nub of this, which I am sure Lord Judge will appreciate, is international humanitarian law. The Government have a view that international humanitarian law absolutely covers lethal autonomous weapons and that there is not a lot to worry about as long as we all say that it is all in accordance with IHL. That is exactly the core of this kind of inquiry, whether it is a year or nine months. The AI Select Committee that I chaired took nine months, and in many ways it was more complex because it covered a much broader range of sectors. Getting to the heart of this and seeing whether we have the ethical and legal backdrop we need is definitely something we can accomplish in a year. I think we would come up with the answers in that period of time.

The Chair: If there are no other questions, thank you very much indeed for your proposal and your time this afternoon.