

Press release: Sir Alan Duncan statement on Guatemala and the CICIG

The Rt Hon Sir Alan Duncan MP, Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office said:

The UK is extremely disappointed by the announcement of the Guatemalan Government on Monday 7 January unilaterally terminating their agreement with the UN on the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), a decision which has since been suspended by the Constitutional Court. CICIG has made a valuable contribution to the fight against corruption and impunity in Guatemala, strengthening the national institutions of Guatemala in the process.

The UK, along with the EU and other international partners, has been a strong supporter of CICIG and we value their work and close cooperation with the Office of the Public Prosecutor of Guatemala.

The UK supports the statement made by the Secretary-General of the United Nations rejecting the Guatemalan government's decision to unilaterally terminate the agreement establishing CICIG and calling for the Guatemalan Government to allow CICIG to continue its important work until the completion of its mandate in September this year.

The UK supports the statements made by the G13 donor group and the EU, and calls on the Government of Guatemala to respect the rule of law and the importance of strong, independent institutions, which are vital for ensuring security and prosperity.

Speech: PM statement in the House of Commons: 14 January 2018

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the further assurances and clarifications we have received from the European Union on the Northern Ireland Protocol.

As a proud Unionist, I share the concerns of Members who want to ensure that in leaving the European Union we do not undermine the strength of our own union in the UK.

That is why when the EU tried to insist on a Protocol that would carve out Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK's customs territory, I said no.

And I secured instead a UK-wide temporary customs arrangement – avoiding both a hard border on the island of Ireland and a customs border down the Irish Sea.

I also negotiated substantial commitments in the Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration to do everything possible to prevent the backstop ever being needed – and to ensure that if it were, it would be a temporary arrangement.

But listening to the debate before Christmas it was clear that we needed to go further.

So I returned to Brussels to faithfully and firmly reflect the concerns of this House.

The conclusions of December's Council went further in addressing our concerns.

They included reaffirming the EU's determination to work speedily to establish by 31st December 2020 alternative arrangements so that the backstop will not need to be triggered.

They underlined that if the backstop were nevertheless to be triggered it would indeed apply temporarily.

They committed that in such an event, the EU would use their best endeavours to continue to negotiate and conclude as soon as possible a subsequent agreement that would replace the backstop.

And they gave a new assurance that negotiations on the Future Relationship could start immediately after the UK's withdrawal.

Since the Council and throughout the Christmas and New Year period I have spoken to a number of European leaders and there have been further discussions with the EU to seek further assurances alongside the Council conclusions.

And today I have published the outcome of these further discussions with an exchange of letters between the UK Government and the Presidents of the European Commission and European Council.

The letter from President Tusk confirms what I said in the House before Christmas – namely that the assurances in the European Council conclusions have legal standing in the EU.

Mr Speaker, my Rt Hon Friend the Attorney General has also written to me today confirming that in the light of the joint response from the Presidents of the European Council and the Commission, these conclusions “would have legal force in international law”, and setting out his opinion – “reinforced” by today's letter – “that the balance of risks favours the conclusion that it is unlikely that the EU will wish to rely on the implementation of the backstop provisions.”

And further, that it is therefore his judgement that “the current draft Withdrawal Agreement now represents the only politically practicable and available means of securing our exit from the European Union.”

Mr Speaker, I know that some Members would ideally like a unilateral exit mechanism or a hard time limit to the backstop.

I have explained this to the EU and tested these points in negotiations.

But the EU would not agree to this, because they fear that such a provision could allow the UK to leave the backstop at any time without any other arrangements in place and require a hard border to be erected between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

I have been very clear with them that this is not something we would ever countenance – that the UK is steadfast in its commitment to the Belfast Agreement and would never allow a return to a hard border.

But it is not enough simply to say this. Both sides also need to take steps to avoid a hard border when the UK is outside of the EU.

Failing to do so would place businesses on the island of Ireland in an impossible position having to choose between costly new checks and procedures that would disrupt their supply chains or breaking the law.

So we have the backstop as a last resort.

But both the Taoiseach and I have said consistently that the best way to avoid a hard border is through the future relationship – that is the sustainable solution. And that neither of us want to use the backstop.

So since the Council we have been looking at commitments that would ensure we get our future relationship or alternative arrangements in place by the end of the Implementation Period, so that there will be no need to enter the backstop and no need for any fear that there will be a hard border.

And that is why in the first of the further assurances they have provided today, the EU has committed to begin exploratory talks on the detailed legal provisions of the future relationship as soon as this Parliament has approved the deal and the Withdrawal Agreement has been signed. And they have been explicit that this can happen immediately after this House votes through the agreement.

If this House approved the deal tomorrow, it would give us almost two years to complete the next phase of the negotiations. And, of course, we will have the option to extend the Implementation Period if further time were needed for either one or two years. It is my absolute conviction that we can turn the Political Declaration into legal text in that time, avoiding the need for the backstop altogether.

The letters also make clear that these talks should give “particular urgency to discussion of ideas, including the use of all available facilitative arrangements and technologies, for replacing the backstop with permanent

arrangements.”

And further that those arrangements “are not required to replicate the backstop provisions in any respect.” So contrary to the fears of some Hon. Members, the EU will not simply insist that the backstop is the only way to avoid a hard border. They have agreed to discuss technological solutions and any alternative means of delivering on this objective – and to get on with this as a priority in the next phase of negotiations.

Second, the EU has now committed to a fast track process to bring our future trade deal into force once it has been agreed. If there is any delay in ratification, the Commission has now said they will recommend provisionally applying the relevant parts of the agreement so that we would not need to enter the backstop.

Such a provisional application process saved four years on the EU-Korea deal and it would prevent any delays in ratification by other EU Member State parliaments from delaying our deal coming into force.

Third, the EU has provided absolute clarity on the explicit linkage between the Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration, and made that link clear in the way the documents are presented.

I know some colleagues are worried about an imbalance between the Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration because the EU cannot reach a legal agreement with us on the future relationship until we are a third country.

But the link between them means the commitments of one cannot be banked without the commitments of the other – and the EU have been clear that they come as a package.

Bad faith by either side in negotiating the legal instruments that will deliver the future relationship laid out in the Political Declaration would be a breach of their legal obligations under the Withdrawal Agreement.

Fourth, the exchange of letters confirms that the UK can unilaterally deliver all of the commitments we made last week to safeguard the interests of the people and businesses of Northern Ireland and their position in our precious union.

For it gives clear answers to address some questions that have been raised since the deal was reached...

...that the deal means no change to the arrangements which underpin north-south cooperation in the Belfast Agreement...

...that Stormont will have a lock on any new laws the EU proposes should be added to the backstop...

...and that the UK can give a restored Northern Ireland Executive a seat at the table on the joint committee overseeing the deal.

Mr Speaker, President Juncker says explicitly in his letter that the backstop

“would represent a suboptimal trading relationship for both sides.”

We have spoken at length about why we want to avoid the backstop. But it is not in the EU’s interests either.

For this backstop gives the UK tariff-free access to the EU’s market.

And it does so with no free movement of people, no financial contribution, no requirement to follow most of the level playing field rules and no need to allow EU boats any access to our waters for fishing.

Furthermore, under these arrangements, UK authorities in Northern Ireland would clear goods for release into the EU Single Market with no further checks or controls.

This is unprecedented and means the EU relying on the UK for the functioning of its own market.

So the EU will not want this backstop to come into force – and the exchange of letters today makes clear that if it did, they would do all they could to bring it to an end as quickly as possible.

Nevertheless, Mr Speaker, I fully understand that these new assurances still will not go as far as some would like.

I recognise that some Members wanted to see changes to the Withdrawal Agreement: a unilateral exit mechanism from the backstop, an end date or rejecting the backstop altogether – although it should be said that this would have risked other EU Member States attempting to row back on the significant wins we have already achieved such as on control over our waters or the sovereignty of Gibraltar.

But the simple truth is this: the EU was not prepared to agree to this.

And rejecting the backstop altogether means no deal.

Whatever version of the Future Relationship you might want to see – from Norway to Canada to any number of variations – all of them require a Withdrawal Agreement and any Withdrawal Agreement will contain the backstop.

And that is not going to change however the House votes tomorrow.

And to those who think we should reject this deal in favour of no deal, because we cannot get every assurance we want...

...I ask what would a no deal Brexit do to strengthen the hand of those campaigning for Scottish independence – or indeed those demanding a border poll in Northern Ireland?

Surely this is the real threat to our Union.

Mr Speaker, with just 74 days until the 29th March the consequences of voting against this deal tomorrow are becoming ever clearer.

With no deal we would have: no Implementation Period, no security partnership, no guarantees for UK citizens overseas, and no certainty for businesses and workers like those I met in Stoke this morning. And we would see changes to everyday life in Northern Ireland that would put the future of our Union at risk.

And if, rather than leaving with no deal, this House blocked Brexit, that would be a subversion of our democracy, saying to the people we were elected to serve that we were unwilling to do what they had instructed.

So I say to Members on all sides of this House – whatever you may have previously concluded – over these next 24 hours, give this deal a second look.

No it is not perfect. And yes it is a compromise.

But when the history books are written, people will look at the decision of this House tomorrow and ask:

Did we deliver on the country's vote to leave the European Union?

Did we safeguard our economy, our security and our Union? Or did we let the British people down?

I say we should deliver for the British people and get on with building a brighter future for our country by backing this deal tomorrow.

And I commend this Statement to the House.

Speech: Tackling obesity is a shared responsibility for society

As Health Secretary, there's some guiding principles I try to follow, like: always start with the patients, follow the evidence, listen to the experts, and then make decisions that do the most good – not the ones that are most politically expedient.

Although, as President Roosevelt once said: "There's as many opinions as there are experts."

So it's great to be here with so many experts today, to discuss the modern challenge of obesity.

I want to start by paying tribute to the work of this APPG, who have done so much to raise the issue, and stand testament to the fact obesity is one of the biggest health challenges we face as a society. Here in Britain, and across the world.

Now, for the first time, obesity is thought to be a bigger problem, globally, than hunger.

Of course, the growing availability of food around the world is a good thing, and is something humanity has sought to achieve throughout history. But abundance of food brings new challenges.

After all, as humans we are predisposed to eat more than we need, as our evolution has designed us to stock up in abundance for leaner times ahead.

Each and every one of us, in rich nations, faces this clash of evolutionary biology and modern life every day. And it's worth noting that as nations grow richer, it's the poorest in them who are the most prone to obesity.

So tackling obesity means tackling social, environmental, physical and psychological pressures, and giving people the capability they need to eat healthily.

And the evidence shows that for a whole host of reasons, some people are more susceptible to obesity than others.

The question I want to address today, and which this APPG is rightly considering, is how to address obesity, and what is the role for government, for business, for civil society and for each of us as citizens. Because tackling obesity is a shared responsibility for society.

This government has taken a global lead in our obesity strategy, chapters 1 and 2, with our ambitious targets to halve childhood obesity by 2030. Our strategy sets out the scale of the problem, and also what we're doing to tackle it.

We're cutting sugar in soft drinks. The sugar levy has removed the equivalent of 90 million kilograms of sugar since it was introduced in 2016, proving that population-wide measures work, and are necessary, alongside promoting healthier behaviours and empowering individuals to make better choices.

We're tackling everything from reformulation of foods, to calorie labelling in restaurants, to restricting advertising and promotion of junk food, to encouraging schools to adopt a 'daily mile' so children are more active.

We're doubling the NHS Diabetes Prevention Programme over the next 5 years, supporting low-calorie diets for obese people with type 2 diabetes.

Just this weekend we announced our latest measures, to curb retailers fuelling promotion of unhealthy foods.

On top of our obesity strategy, our Long Term Plan for the NHS sets out how we're driving the obesity strategy across the health service.

GPs are 'making every contact count' in identifying and supporting overweight children and adults manage their weight.

Hospitals will increasingly support patients whose obesity leaves them

hospitalised, with a huge burden of cost on the NHS.

We'll learn from anywhere, so we've studied the success of cities like Amsterdam and their 'whole systems approach' to reducing childhood obesity. And I want us to keep learning from the latest evidence and new approaches from around the world.

The only way we're going to solve the growing, global challenge of obesity is if everyone plays their part.

The state has a vital role to play in reducing the environmental factors that contribute to obesity and protecting vulnerable children. We will play our part.

Local government has an important role supporting healthier high streets through better planning decisions, through their role in education, providing equipment for exercise, helping protect and create more open spaces for children to play and be active.

The health service itself has a vital – and growing – role to play in preventing obesity and helping people achieve a healthy weight.

Public Health England are world leaders in gathering and analysing data so we can make the correct, evidence-led, decisions.

Thanks to their work on identifying the role of sugar in obesity, we corrected the decades old mistake of focusing too much on saturated fat.

They will have a crucial role to play in developing the next phase of data-driven public health programmes using predictive prevention.

Companies large and small have a role to play in reformulating their products. I welcome action that's been taken so far, I'm excited by some of the coming science, and I want to see more action by the food industry.

Civil society has a role to play too in supporting people to stay healthy. I want to pay tribute to individuals with big voices like Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver, who use their influence to try to change habits, norms and assumptions, as well as trying to change government policy. Because changing behaviour means changing norms, as well as the formal rules we set in this building.

Finally, each of us, as individuals, we have a role to play and must take responsibility for our own health. Because even with the best efforts of the state and society, we can't solve the obesity challenge without individuals taking personal responsibility too: this is a shared responsibility.

We're putting in a record £20.5 billion extra a year into the NHS – the longest and largest cash settlement in its history – as we transform the health service over the next decade.

To rise to the challenges of today and seize the opportunities of the future, we're implementing the new NHS Long Term Plan on the principle that

prevention is better than cure.

It's better for people if we prevent them becoming patients in the first place. It's better for the NHS if they help people stay healthy rather than treating them only when they fall ill. And it's better for taxpayers, and the nation, if we build a sustainable health system that will be there, for all of us, in years to come. The prevention agenda means yes, making changes only government can make.

That same prevention agenda means we need to do more to support people to take care of themselves, to keep themselves healthy – to empower people with the capability and expectation that they have an important role to play too.

I want to take a moment to set out the approach I take to these sorts of interventions.

I am no fan of nanny state interventions that treat everyone the same, or punish the masses for the problems of a minority.

The blanket public health approach we needed in an age of contagious diseases is still needed now in some areas. But the modern public health problems of largely non-communicable diseases need a different attitude, and a much more targeted approach.

No organisation wanting to tackle a problem as big as obesity would use the same approach for everyone, and target the whole population the same. After all, food is safe, obviously critical, as part of a balanced diet. Even a fatty cut of delicious steak is healthy in moderation.

There is huge, overwhelming, support for action to tackle obesity. Let's not lose that support with too much of a blanket approach.

Take alcohol. For 95% of people, the alcohol we drink is perfectly safe and normal. I like a pint or the odd glass of wine, and I know I speak for most of my audience and certainly the vast majority of my colleagues too. Let's not punish the masses for perfectly healthy behaviour.

But for the 5% who drink around a third of all the alcohol consumed, who too often end up hospitalised and seriously ill because of it, we need much more serious intervention.

The same attitude is needed across public health: lots more targeting, less intervention for the healthy, more intervention for those who need it. And the exciting thing is, we have a radically expanding toolkit at our disposal.

The approach we take with a 60-year-old man, who's set in his ways, must be different to the approach we take with a young, pregnant mother trying to get healthy for the sake of her baby.

And in the future, as we unlock our genetic codes and adopt new technologies like artificial intelligence, we can be yet more targeted too. We can even get ahead of the problem, supporting people who are likely to have problems with help and nutritional support.

With the right attitude and technology, we can lead the world with predictive prevention and personalised health services.

This approach can only work if we see tackling obesity as a shared responsibility. Diet and physical activity – too much and too little – are, by far and away, the 2 biggest factors that contribute to obesity. And the best solutions are in the vast majority of cases not medicinal, but behavioural.

The role of the health service is just as much to prescribe behaviour change as it is to prescribe drugs. This is now widely accepted, but needs to be embedded in the way we organise our NHS.

Nutritional advice, counselling, activity and exercise must be just as much a part of the toolkit of the NHS as drugs. This insight is behind our strong support for social prescribing, embedded in our NHS Long Term Plan.

This agenda is so important we're going to introduce more than 1,000 trained social prescribing link workers within the next 2 years, to help refer over 900,000 people – because the evidence shows that social prescribing, like activity or an exercise classes, can lead to the same or better outcomes than drugs.

I also strongly believe that because many of those social cures are free, they don't have multi-million dollar marketing budgets behind them. So it's the job of those of us in government to compensate and lean in – supporting training and developing the evidence base for social prescribing.

And that brings me to the definitional issue. I understand the reasons why some have called for obesity to be reclassified as a disease. People rightly want to lessen the stigma and increase support for people with obesity.

I agree with both of those goals. I've listened to the various views within the medical system, and I've taken advice. And I'm a staunch supporter of action to tackle obesity.

But I think reclassifying obesity isn't the way to do it. In trying to reduce one stigma, we risk creating another. I worry that calling obesity a disease, like cancer, risks being counter-productive and sending out the wrong message.

And because obesity is a condition born of human behaviour, my biggest worry is that if people with obesity are told they have a disease, it risks robbing them of agency and the incentive to change behaviour.

We risk taking away their power, where we must do everything we can to support and empower and expect them to change their lives through healthier choices.

Instead of helping them, we make them feel helpless. I don't think that helps. Is that what we want? More drugs and medical solutions encouraging life-long dependency on prescriptions and pills? No: we should have high expectations and support people to meet them.

Now, I know there's a healthy debate around this, and I welcome today's event and a frank and public discussion, because anything we can do to increase the focus on and reduce the stigma around obesity is hugely welcome. We share the same goal: to reduce obesity and help people live healthier lives.

But, while we shouldn't call obesity a disease, we should redouble our efforts to act. And perhaps nowhere is the prevention agenda more important than childhood obesity.

Almost a quarter of 4 and 5 year-olds are now overweight or obese, and that rises to a third by the time children are 11.

We must prevent overweight kids from becoming obese adults. And for children, I do believe in the strongest government interventions.

Let's help families and empower parents to lead healthier and more active lives, for the sake of the children. Let's make Britain the best place for children to grow up, where a child's health and life chances aren't curtailed by obesity before they even start secondary school. Let's treat healthy adults like healthy adults, and treat children like children.

Prevention will be embedded into every part of the NHS over the next decade. State, society, business and people. We each have our part to play.

We have a shared responsibility to work together to tackle obesity and build the health system and society we all want to see.

[Press release: Housing Minister confirms funding for councils to crack down on rogue landlords](#)

- More than 50 councils to benefit from nearly £2.4 million to ramp up action against the minority of irresponsible landlords who make tenants' lives a misery
- Money to be used to boost short-term staffing and create new digital tools to help councils better protect tenants
- Measures build on action taken by government to protect renters and drive up standards across the sector

More than 50 councils across the country will share nearly £2.4 million of extra funding to crack down on rogue landlords, Housing Minister Heather Wheeler has announced today (14 January 2019).

Whilst the majority of landlords provide decent homes for their tenants, the cash boost will enable local councils to step up action against the small

minority who continue to flout the law and force vulnerable tenants such as young families to live in inadequate or unsafe housing.

Councils across the country from Allerdale to Watford will receive a share of the funding for projects to take tougher action against unscrupulous landlords.

Among the councils to benefit from the funding are:

- Walsall – to improve cross-agency enforcement work, including the innovative use of drones and thermal mapping to identify problem properties
- Lancaster – to create a training programme for existing enforcement staff across the Lancashire region
- Greater London Authority (GLA) and Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) – allocated over £330,000 between them to carry out coordinated work to tackle rogue landlords who operate across multiple local authorities in their regions

Housing Minister Heather Wheeler MP said:

Everyone has the right to live in a home that is safe and secure, and it is vital we crack down on the small minority of landlords who are not giving their tenants this security.

This extra funding will further boost councils' ability to root out rogue landlords and ensure that poor-quality homes in the area are improved, making the housing market fairer for everyone.

The government has already equipped local authorities with strong powers to tackle criminal landlords, ranging from fines to outright bans for the worst offenders.

The new funding will be used to support a range of projects that councils have said will help them to ramp up action against criminal landlords – for example, to build relationships with external organisations such as the emergency services, legal services and local housing advocates.

Councils may also decide to support tenants to take action against poor standards through rent repayment orders, or develop digital solutions, helping officers to report back and make decisions quicker.

Councils that receive funding will be encouraged to share best practice and examples of innovative approaches, to help improve enforcement in other areas.

This builds on ongoing government action to drive up standards in the private rented sector – ensuring millions of hard-working tenants can live in the homes they deserve and creating a housing market that works for everyone.

There are 4.7 million households in the private rented sector in England, with recent statistics showing that 82% of private renters are satisfied with their accommodation.

The fund will help councils to take on the most common challenges that stand in the way of tackling poor standards in the private rented sector, including:

- the need for better information – on housing stock and on landlords and agents operating in their areas
- data sharing between authorities and agencies – identifying and bringing together different data sets to enable better enforcement targeting
- internal ‘ways of working’ – improving housing-specific legal expertise, in-house communication between teams, and tools and strategies to effectively implement policy
- innovative software – for enforcement officers to record their findings, gather evidence and streamline the enforcement process.

Press release: Housing Minister confirms funding for councils to crack down on rogue landlords

More than 50 councils across the country will share extra funding to crack down on rogue landlords.