

The Afghan war

President Biden's decision to pull US troops out of Afghanistan rapidly has left that country fighting a nasty civil war with claims from the Afghan government side that there was insufficient consultation and no orderly handover. They feel their position against the Taliban is now weakened. According to media stories there was little consultation or discussion with NATO allies either, even though our military has done a lot to support the US led action over the years.

Let me begin by praising and thanking all the western forces and especially UK military personnel who risked their lives or gave their lives in this long conflict. They successfully confronted some extreme violence and gave Afghanistan a chance of a better life under a democratic system that respects the rights of all people in the country and offers opportunity to women and girls as well as to the men. This makes how we leave important, as the wish must be that the home grown government and forces for democracy that we have left behind now have the training and equipment to stabilise their country and resist violence against people and the governing system.

I agree that we needed to make an orderly exit, disengaging our forces from direct conflict on the streets and supporting benign local military policing to create and keep a peace. The whole long Afghan war has highlighted how difficult it is for a foreign invading force to help establish a stable freedom loving democratic system once it has with skill and some loss of life swept aside a brutal undemocratic regime. We do not and should not wish to become colonial governments, however well intentioned, acting as supporters but seen as puppet masters of local governments that emerge from the civil wars. The US and UK got to our own democratic systems by civil wars and wars of independence our ancestors fought, largely without foreign intervention.

As governments will say to us, we need to learn the lessons – again – of the Afghan interventions. They seem to be the same as elsewhere. A brave military campaign can only succeed if there is the political skill to see through a lasting peace that enough local people buy into. A war can only be won if there are enough people in the country that back the intervention by the foreign power and see it as helpful. Viet Nam showed how horribly wrong such interventions can go when the US misjudges the military and the political realities at the same time.

Consulting on COP 26

One of my constituents has written asking me to consult widely on the topic of what agenda the UK should be promoting at COP 26. I think that is a good idea, so I invite you all today to write in to say what you think the

Conference should be saying and doing.

I have made clear my view that the Conference should be virtual, as it will be telling the rest of us to fly less and to go easy on the air conditioned hotels and meat dinners. It needs to examine why it is that many people accept the science that carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas and that too much of it, all things being equal, can cause warming yet most are not willing to change their lifestyles, homes and transport in the way governments and green campaigners require. Where are the affordable new heating systems, personal transport and better diets that will be needed to woo enough people away from their carbon based lives?

It is important that the gap between the Green Governors and the rest does not get larger, with cries of hypocrisy every time a leading Green campaigner steps off another plane or gets into a diesel taxi. Carbon cutting needs to be popular to succeed. That means better and cheaper products that people want to buy. It did not take rules, laws, subsidies and taxes to get people to buy smartphones. Over to you.

Test and trace

I could see the point of Test and trace when few people were vaccinated and when rising caseloads could lead to a surge in people with serious illness needing hospital help. Today now the vaccines seem to have broken most of the link between case numbers, hospital patient numbers and deaths it is less clear that the current Test and Trace system is sensible.

Test and Trace always had weaknesses, largely based on individual reactions to it. Some people did not download the app and never liked the system. It could not be mandatory as not everyone has a mobile phone and there was no way people could be made to keep a charged phone by their side every day 24 hours a day. Some who downloaded the app then declined to take any incoming call which might have been a warning call from the system to get them to self isolate. Others took the call, promised to co-operate but found compliance too difficult.

Most people with jobs and family duties are not in an easy position to go home and stay home for 14 days. Few have a fortnight's supply of good food ready. Many need the income from working and not all can do everything from their home. Many have to do things outside the home to look after other family members. The ask of Test and Trace was simply too high for some who were not ill, did not feel they had it or were going to get it, and were unsure why they had been told to self isolate in the first place. I hear details are scarce about where and how you were in contact for those who were approached. This is for understandable reasons as the app has to reassure on privacy about who went where and when.

Today there is the danger that the Test and Trace system generates far too many precautionary requirements to self isolate for many people who do not have the disease and are not about to have it. The rules need relaxing as we learn “to live with the disease” as the government says. No major country has succeeded in eliminating CV 19, even those who have had more severe and longer lockdowns than us. The best advice surely is to ask people who feel ill with likely symptoms to get tested, and to stay isolated if they turn out to have it.

The government's case for the Police, Crime and Sentencing Bill

I thought it would be helpful for constituents to share this explanation of the government's Bill being debated and voted on today:

Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill

- The first job of any government is to keep people safe, and we have been committed to cutting crime and reforming our justice system so that it serves the law-abiding majority.
- That is why, through our new Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, we are overhauling our justice system to give the police and courts the powers they need to keep our streets safe, while providing greater opportunities for offenders to turn their lives around and better contribute to society.

We are reforming our justice system to make sure criminals spend longer in jail:

- Extending Whole Life Orders for the premeditated murder of a child as well as ending the automatic early release of dangerous criminals – keeping the worst offenders behind bars and off our streets. These measures send a clear message that those who commit the most heinous crimes will spend the rest of their lives behind bars. As well as Whole Life Orders, new powers announced today will halt the automatic early release of offenders convicted of serious violent and sexual offences – ensuring they spend at least two-thirds of their sentence behind bars.
- Introducing life sentences for killer drivers, restoring faith in our justice system that the punishment must fit the crime. Drivers who cause fatal accidents while speeding, racing, using a mobile phone or who are under the influence of drugs or alcohol will now face life sentences, ensuring they feel the full force of the law for their selfish actions that cause the deaths of loved ones on our roads.
- Increasing the maximum penalty for criminal damage of a memorial from three

months to 10 years, protecting our memorials from desecration. The desecration of our war memorials is an abhorrent act and offenders will face the full force of the law for their actions.

- Doubling the maximum sentence for assaulting an emergency worker from twelve months to two years. In line with our manifesto commitment, this legislation doubles the maximum sentence for those convicted of assaults on frontline staff including police officers, firefighters and paramedics.
- Extending 'positions of trust' laws to protect teenagers from abuse by sports coaches and religious leaders so that our young people can trust the adults they look to for support. This landmark step to protect our young people sends a clear message that positions of trust must not be abused by the very people that our young people look up to and seek guidance from.
- Introducing 'Kay's Law' to better protect victims and witnesses in cases of violent and sexual offences. 'Kay's Law' encourages the police to impose strict conditions on bail in high harm cases, introduces new pre-charge bail time periods for suspects and introduces a new duty to seek the views of victims on pre-charge bail conditions. 'Kay's Law' is in memory of Kay Richardson who tragically lost her life at her ex-partner's hands while he was released under investigation, rather than on bail. He committed suicide before he could be convicted.
- Introducing tougher community sentences – ensuring offenders give back to society. The measures will double the amount of time offenders can be subject to curfew restrictions, rising from 12 months to two years.
- Enabling profoundly deaf people to sit on juries – extending participation in our justice system further into our society. Under the new legislation a British Sign Language Interpreter will be allowed to be present in the jury deliberation room.

We are backing the police to cut crime:

- Enshrining the Police Covenant into law – strengthening the support for serving and retired officers and their families. The covenant creates a statutory duty for the Government to do more to support the police, both those currently serving and retired, whilst also placing a focus on physical protection, health and wellbeing, as well as support for families.
- Introducing Serious Violence Reduction Orders to help officers target persistent offenders. SVRO's are court-imposed orders which will apply to individuals previously convicted of carrying a knife or offensive weapon. Police will be able to stop and search those who are subject to an SVRO to check if they are carrying a knife or offensive weapon again.
- Strengthening police powers to tackle non-violent protests that cause significant disruption to the public. The measures in the Bill will allow the police to take a more proactive approach in managing highly disruptive protests and will increase the police's ability to prevent protests causing serious disruption to the public.

- Introducing Homicide Reviews where an offensive weapon was involved to identify lessons to be learnt and reduce violent crime. We are introducing a requirement on the police, local authorities, and local health boards to review the circumstances of homicides involving the use of an offensive weapon. The purpose of the review is to identify the lessons to be learnt from the tragic death and to decide whether further action should be taken.
- Criminalising trespass and strengthening police powers to tackle unauthorised encampments that can cause harm, disruption and distress to our local communities. Under the new legislation police will have the power to seize vehicles and arrest or fine trespassers who intend to reside on private and public land without permission, whilst also ensuring they are not able to return for at least 12 months. The new criminal offence will carry a maximum sentence of three months in prison, a fine of up to £2,500 or both.

This builds on our record of cutting crime and backing our frontline officers:

- Boosting police funding by £636 million this year, ensuring our frontline officers have everything need to keep us safe. This brings total police funding up to £15.8 billion for 2021-2022, including £400 million to recruit 20,000 new officers by 2023, £914 million for counter-terrorism policing, and £1.1 billion to target national priorities such as reducing serious violence and clamping down on county lines.
- Recruiting 20,000 new police officers, helping to keep our streets safe. We have already recruited 8,771 new officers, and we are on track to recruit 20,000 extra officers by 2023. As part of this year's £636 million police funding settlement, more than £400 million will go towards recruiting additional officers.
- Cutting crime by 9 per cent between March 2019 and March 2020, delivering on our promise to cut crime in our communities. In the year before the pandemic, overall crime fell by 9 per cent – demonstrating that by putting more police on the streets, with increased investment and resources, we are delivering on our promise to cut crime and build back safer.
- Delivering an extra £30 million to help the police enforce coronavirus regulations, helping to protect the NHS and save lives. The £30 million funding will allow police forces to increase patrols in town centres, ensuring that people are complying with the new restrictions, particularly in high-risk areas.
- Dismantling county lines gangs through a £40 million funding boost, keeping our towns and children safe from drug gangs. The £40 million of new money to tackle county lines and drugs supply brings the total invested to £65 million since November 2019. The funding has already seen more than 3,400 people arrested, more than 550 lines closed, more than £9 million street value of drugs and £1.5 million cash seized and more than 770 vulnerable people safeguarded.
- Delivering £148 million of new investment to cut crime and protect

communities from the scourge of illegal drugs. This funding represents a comprehensive drive to cut drug-fuelled crime and violence in communities as we build back safer after the pandemic. Our investment includes £28 million for Project ADDER that brings together the police and drug recovery services to target and reduce drug-related offending and drug use.

- Delivering £45 million through the Safer Streets Fund to tackle theft, robberies and burglaries in our towns. This funding delivers proven measures to cut neighbourhood crime including locked gates around alleyways, increased street-lighting and the installation of CCTV. The third round of the Safer Streets Fund is now open and will focus on projects that help women and girls feel safer in our communities.

Amendments:

- Pet Theft. We are deeply concerned by the rise in pet theft, and we are keen to take the right action to tackle this abhorrent and distressing crime. That is why we have launched the cross-Government Pet Theft Taskforce to undertake an end-to-end review of pet theft and consider every aspect from prevention, reporting, enforcement and prosecution. The taskforce will report in the summer and begin work to implement approved policy recommendations in the autumn. This amendment would reduce the sentence available for theft of a pet from seven years down to a maximum of two years. It is our intention to make any necessary changes to this Bill in the Lords, before it returns to the Commons once we have finalised the detail of exactly what is needed, using a range of powers including primary legislation.

- Minimum sentences for rape. We recognise that sexual violence is a devastating crime that can have life-long impacts on victims and survivors. The maximum penalty for rape is life imprisonment and it is already the case that rape offenders receive lengthy sentences, with two thirds in 2020 receiving custodial sentences above the seven-year minimum that Labour is proposing. By extending the automatic release point, we are already increasing the time served in custody of the same offenders that the Labour amendment would affect.

- Voyeurism. We recognise the importance of ensuring that the law on taking and sharing intimate images is effectively protecting victims and we share concerns about reports of these distressing incidents. That is why we have asked the Law Commission to carry out a detailed review of the law around the taking, making and sharing of intimate images without consent. It is important that we consider the Law Commission's analysis and recommendations before committing to changing legislation in this area.

- Increasing maximum sentences for assaulting retail workers. It is completely unacceptable to threaten or assault retail staff, especially when they are working so hard to keep vital services running. That is why we have led work with the retail sector to understand their concerns. Our review identified that victims and employers not reporting offences and wider concerns about police handling of reports was the key issue to address, rather than creating a new specific offence which is already covered in law. We certainly do not rule out an amendment on this issue – if appropriate – in

the Lords.

- Increasing maximum sentences for allowing a child to suffer injury or death. We can confirm that officials are conducting a review into the law in this area, as the matter is more complex than simply increasing the maximum penalty.
 - Street Harassment. We recognise the shocking extent of street harassment suffered particularly by women and girls and the strength of feeling in the House concerning the need for a new offence. While there are existing offences available to address sexual harassment, we remain open-minded on how to further address this issue. Tackling sexual harassment is not a matter we can expect the criminal law to solve on its own and our VAWG strategy will be seeking to drive cultural change through education and awareness raising.
 - 'Sex for rent'. 'Sex for rent' is an abhorrent practice and we are committed to protecting vulnerable individuals from harm and exploitation. However, the Sexual Offences Act 2003 already covers many of the offences involved in 'sex for rent' cases and recently the CPS pursued the prosecution of a man for two such alleged offences under the Sexual Offences Act. We are continuing to examine this issue in the context of the development of our VAWG strategy and in the light of the outcome of the current criminal proceedings.
 - Sex offenders: change of name. We already have some of the toughest measures in the world to manage sex offenders, and the provisions in the Bill, which have been informed by feedback from the police, will help ensure our system is as robust, adaptable and effective as possible. If a registered sex offender changes their name, the existing law requires them to notify the police within three days. Failure to do so is a criminal offence punishable by a maximum of five years' imprisonment. We are committed to ensuring the current system is working and we intend to undertake a review of the issue to understand the scale of the problem and address any weaknesses.
 - New offence of failing to stop or report incidents involving actual or potential serious or fatal injury with 14-year max penalty. We take road safety very seriously and we understand the traumatic effects of drivers failing to stop when a person is caused serious injury or even killed. We know that in a small number of cases, the failure to stop and report may be related to an event which leads to the death or serious injury of another person. But in the vast majority of cases, convictions for failure to stop are against drivers who have failed to stop, after causing minor property damage or low-level personal injury. The proposed amendment would create serious anomalies within the driving offences framework and as a result the Department for Transport are exploring how to address the offence in the wider context of road safety.
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The government does wish to stop illegal immigration

The Home Secretary has consistently promised to curb illegal migration into the country and has consistently instructed her department to implement that policy. She has also according to the press made various proposals to officials to bring this about only to have them watered down, undermined or declared illegal by the courts. She has not been saying one thing to us and another in private as some contributors have alleged.

Frustrated by the lack of progress she is now instituting senior management change for the Immigration service and bringing forward stronger legislation at the same time. It is important that Parliament grants sufficient powers to stop the courts undermining official policy, and effective powers to deter illegals coming to us from safe countries in the EU.

The government is looking at other advanced democratic countries like Australia to see how they have better control over illegal movements.