

Afghanistan emergency session

09:38:00

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson)

I beg to move,

That this House has considered the situation in Afghanistan.

May I begin by thanking you, Mr Speaker, and all the parliamentary staff for enabling us to meet this morning? Before I turn to today's debate, I am sure the House will want to join you, Mr Speaker, and me in sending our condolences to the family and friends of those killed in the appalling shooting in Plymouth last week. Investigations are of course continuing, but we will learn every possible lesson from this tragedy.

I know that Members across the House share my concern about the situation in Afghanistan, the issues it raises for our own security and the fears of many remaining in that country, especially women and children. The sacrifice in Afghanistan is seared into our national consciousness, with 150,000 people serving there from across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, including a number of Members in all parts of the House, whose voices will be particularly important today. So it is absolutely right that we should come together for this debate.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)

As someone who opposed this nation-building intervention, I believe that it now brings its responsibilities. Will the Prime Minister assure me that, in addition to getting our nationals out safely, and in offering a generous welcome to the many refugees, all necessary resources will be given to those Afghans and others who helped the British Council in its work, including the promotion of women's rights? Many are in fear of their lives—of retribution from the Taliban. The Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme is slow-moving at the moment. Will he commit the necessary resource, because the window of opportunity is narrow and no one must be left behind.

Mr Speaker

We have got the point. May I remind Members that if you are going to intervene, you have got to be short. If you intervene more than twice, you will understand why you have gone down the list—if there was one. [Laughter.]

The Prime Minister

I thank my hon. Friend. I can assure him that, as I will be saying in just a few moments, we will be doing everything we can to support those who have helped the UK mission in Afghanistan and investing everything that we can to support the wider area around Afghanistan, and to do everything that we can to avert a humanitarian crisis.

It is almost 20 years since the United States suffered the most catastrophic attack on its people since the second world war, in which 67 British citizens also lost their lives, at the hands of murderous terrorist groups incubated in Afghanistan. In response, NATO invoked article 5 of its treaty for the first and only time in its history, and the United Kingdom, among others, joined America in going into Afghanistan on a mission to extirpate al-Qaeda in that country, and to do whatever we could to stabilise Afghanistan, in spite of all the difficulties and challenges we knew that we would face. And we succeeded in that core mission.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con)

Does the Prime Minister agree that we are ceding back the country to the very insurgency that we went in to defeat in the first place, and that the reputation of the west for support for democracies around the world has suffered? There are so many lessons to be learned from what happened over the last 20 years. Will he now agree to a formal independent inquiry into conduct in Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister

As I said in the House just a few weeks ago, there was an extensive defence review about the Afghan mission after the combat mission ended in 2014, and I believe that most of the key questions have already been extensively gone into. It is important that we in this House should today be able to scrutinise events as they unfold.

As I was saying, we succeeded in that core mission, and the training camps in the mountain ranges of Afghanistan were destroyed. Al-Qaeda plots against this country were foiled because our serving men and women were there, and no successful terrorist attacks against the west have been mounted from Afghan soil for two decades.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)

May I take the Prime Minister back to his remarks in the House on 8 July, when he referred to the assessment that he had made? There has clearly been a

catastrophic failure of our intelligence, or our assessment of the intelligence, because of the speed with which this has caught us unawares. Can he set out for the House how we may assure ourselves that in future years no terrorist attacks put together in Afghanistan take place here in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister

I think it would be fair to say that the events in Afghanistan have unfolded faster, and the collapse has been faster, than I think even the Taliban themselves predicted. What is not true is to say that the UK Government were unprepared or did not foresee this, because it was certainly part of our planning. The very difficult logistical operation for the withdrawal of UK nationals has been under preparation for many months, and I can tell the House that the decision to commission the emergency handling centre at the airport—the commissioning of that centre—took place two weeks ago.

If I can just make a little more progress, I will certainly give way in a moment.

Alongside this core mission, we worked for a better future for the people of Afghanistan. The heroism and tireless work of our armed forces contributed to national elections as well as to the promotion and protection of human rights and equalities in a way that many in Afghanistan had not previously known. Whereas 20 years ago, almost no girls went to school and women were banned from positions of governance, now 3.6 million girls have been in school this year alone and women hold over a quarter of the seats in the Afghan Parliament. But we must be honest and accept that huge difficulties were encountered at each turn, and some of this progress is fragile.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op)

I pay tribute to our ambassador and the diplomatic team in Kabul and our armed forces on the ground, who have been evacuating people in extraordinary circumstances. One of the consequences of the rapidity of the collapse of Kabul is that many people have been left trapped, unable to access the airport and unable to evacuate, including many of those who should be coming to this country who served us bravely in that country and many women who are particularly at risk. Many of us across the House will have experienced chaos in the last 24 to 48 hours in communicating information through to the ground to get some of those people out of the country. Can the Prime Minister give us some assurances about how we can get that information through so that we can get those brave people out of there, including many whose lives are at risk right now in Kabul?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman raises exactly the right question. I spoke this morning to Ambassador Sir Laurie Bristow as well as to Brigadier Dan Blanchford, who is handling the evacuation. It would be fair to say that the situation has stabilised since the weekend, but it remains precarious and the UK officials on the ground are doing everything that they can to expedite the movement of people—those who need to come out, whether from the ARAP scheme or the eligible persons—to get from Kabul to the airport. At the moment, it would be fair to say that the Taliban are allowing that evacuation to go ahead, but the most important thing is that we get this done in as expeditious a fashion as we can, and that is what we are doing. I am grateful not just to the UK forces who are now out there helping to stabilise the airport, but also to the US forces.

Can I just make some progress? The combat phase of our mission ended in 2014, when we brought the vast majority of our troops home and handed over responsibility for security to the Afghans themselves, and we continued to support their efforts. Even at that stage, we should remember that conflict was continuous and that, in spite of the bravery and sacrifice of the Afghan army—we should never forget that 69,000 of those Afghan army troops gave their lives in this conflict—significant parts of the country remained contested or under Taliban control. So when, after two decades, the Americans prepared to take their long-predicted and well-trailed step of a final extraction of their forces, we looked at many options, including the potential for staying longer ourselves, finding new partners or even increasing our presence.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con)

Will the Prime Minister share with the House what assessment UK intelligence services made of the relative fighting capacity currently of the Afghan army and the Taliban, and will he tell us what representations the UK Government made to our US allies with regards to their timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister

I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He asks for a commentary on the respective military potential for power of the Taliban and the Afghan forces. It is pretty clear from what has happened that the collapse of the Afghan forces has been much faster than expected. As for our NATO allies and allies around the world, when it came for us to look at the options that this country might have in view of the American decision to withdraw, we came up against this hard reality that since 2009, America has deployed 98% of all weapons released from NATO aircraft in Afghanistan and, at the peak of the operation, when there were 132,000 troops

on the ground, 90,000 of them were American. The west could not continue this US-led mission—a mission conceived and executed in support and defence of America—without American logistics, without US air power and without American might.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con)

I note the point that my right hon. Friend is making about the importance of American support for our efforts in Afghanistan and those of our allies, but will he please set out when he first spoke personally to Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General of NATO, to discuss with him the possibility of putting together an alliance of other forces in order to replace American support in Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I spoke to Secretary-General Stoltenberg only the other day about NATO's continuing role in Afghanistan, but I really think that it is an illusion to believe that there is appetite among any of our partners for a continued military presence or for a military solution imposed by NATO in Afghanistan. That idea ended with the combat mission in 2014. I do not believe that today deploying tens of thousands of British troops to fight the Taliban is an option that, no matter how sincerely people may advocate it—and I appreciate their sincerity—would commend itself either to the British people or to this House. We must deal with the position as it now is, accepting what we have achieved and what we have not achieved.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)

The Prime Minister seemed to be making an argument earlier that he had anticipated something similar to what went on, by having the rapid response force ready and waiting. Why, then, were he and the Foreign Secretary both on their holidays when this catastrophe happened?

The Prime Minister

The Government have been working around the clock to deal with the unfolding situation. We must deal with the world as it is, accepting what we have achieved and what we have not achieved. The UK will work with our international partners on a shared plan to support the people of Afghanistan and to contribute to regional stability. There will be five parts to this approach.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con)

Will my right hon. Friend give way?

The Prime Minister

In just a minute.

First, our immediate focus must be on helping those to whom we have direct obligations, by evacuating UK nationals together with those Afghans who have assisted our efforts over the past 20 years. I know that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the bravery and commitment of our ambassador, Sir Laurie Bristow.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP)

I thank the Prime Minister for giving way on that particular point. He will be aware that there are 228 missionaries in Afghanistan currently under sentence of death; those missionaries need to be taken out of Afghanistan. Of course, there are tens of thousands of others who are under sentence of death and fear for their lives. Will he assure the House that every effort will be made to bring back to safe haven people whose lives are under threat as a result of the catastrophe in foreign policy that has gone on in that country?

The Prime Minister

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the very needy case that he does. I am sure that colleagues across the House—literally every Member, I imagine—have received messages from people who know someone who needs to get out of Afghanistan. I can tell him that we are doing everything we can to help out of that country those people to whom we owe a debt of obligation. On that point, I repeat my thanks not just to Laurie Bristow, but also to the commander on the ground, Brigadier Dan Blanchford and the entire British team in Kabul.

I want to make some progress.

I can tell the House that we have so far secured the safe return of 306 UK nationals and 2,052 Afghan nationals as part of our resettlement programme, with a further 2,000 Afghan applications completed and many more being processed. UK officials are working round the clock to keep the exit door open in the most difficult circumstances and are actively seeking those who we believe are eligible but as yet unregistered.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)

Can the Prime Minister explain, then, how many people he thinks are eligible for relocation and are still to sign up? He says that the Government are doing “everything we can” to get these people out, so what does “everything we can”

mean? How are they identifying these people and where they are, especially if they are already in hiding in fear of their lives?

The Prime Minister

That is why it is so important that we maintain a presence at Kabul airport and that is why we have been getting the message out that we want people to come through. As I said earlier, it is important for everybody to understand that in the days that we have ahead of us, which may be short, at the moment this is an environment in which the Taliban are permitting this evacuation to take place. These are interpreters, they are locally engaged staff and others who have risked their lives supporting our military efforts and seeking to secure new freedoms for their country. We are proud to bring these brave Afghans to our shores and we continue to appeal for more to come forward.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)

The Home Secretary announced this morning that the UK will take 20,000 refugees from Afghanistan but that only 5,000 will be able to come this year. What are the 15,000 meant to do? Hang around and wait to be executed?

The Prime Minister

That is the 5,000 on whom—we are spending £200 million to bring a further 5,000 on top; I think it will be 10,000 altogether that we bring in under the ARAP and other programmes. We will increase that number over the coming years to 20,000, as I said, but the bulk of the effort of this country will be directed and should be directed at supporting people in Afghanistan and in the region to prevent a worse humanitarian crisis. I tell the House that in that conviction I am supported very strongly both by President Macron of France and Chancellor Merkel of Germany.

We are also doing everything possible to accelerate the visas for the—
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

The hon. Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) cannot be like a drone in the Chamber, completely above everybody all the way through. I ask her to stand up and down please, and not just hover.

The Prime Minister

I was telling the House that we are making sure that we bring back the 35 brilliant Chevening scholars so that they can come and study in our great universities. We

are deploying an additional 800 British troops to support this evacuation operation and I can assure the House that we will continue the operation for as long as conditions at the airport allow.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op)

As of last week, it was still Home Office policy that we would send people back to Kabul because we thought that it was safe. Will the Prime Minister also confirm that it is not just about people coming out of Afghanistan but about keeping people safe here, and that we will not send people back to this nightmare?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady is entirely right that we will not be sending people back to Afghanistan; nor, by the way, will we allow people to come from Afghanistan to this country in an indiscriminate way. We want to be generous, but we must make sure that we look after our own security. Over the coming weeks, we will redouble our efforts, working with others to protect the UK homeland and all our citizens and interests from any threat that may emanate from a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, from terrorism to the narcotics trade.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con)

Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must do everything we can to support those who have supported us, like Royal Marine Pen Farthing and his Nowzad charity's veterinary staff and their immediate families, who now need safe passage back to the UK?

The Prime Minister

Like many of us, I have been lobbied extensively about the excellent work done by Mr Pen Farthing. I am well aware of his cause and all the wonderful things that he has done for animals in Afghanistan. I can tell my hon. Friend that we will do everything that we can to help Mr Pen Farthing and others who face particular difficulties, as he does—as I say, without in any way jeopardising our own national security. These are concerns shared across the international community, from the region itself to all of the NATO alliance and, indeed, all five permanent members of the UN Security Council. I will chair a virtual meeting of the G7 in the coming days.

Thirdly, we have an enduring commitment to all the Afghan people. Now more than ever we must reaffirm that commitment. Our efforts must focus on supporting the Afghan people in the region, particularly those fleeing conflict or

the threat of violence. We therefore call on the United Nations to lead a new humanitarian effort in the region.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)

I thank the Prime Minister for giving way, and I welcome his commitment to support in the region, and also the Government's commitment to a resettlement programme. The Home Secretary announced in 2019 that the UK would continue a resettlement scheme of 5,000 refugees a year after the Syrian scheme closed. Can the Prime Minister confirm that the announcement today of an Afghan resettlement scheme is in addition to that existing 5,000 resettlement commitment, as opposed to simply being a refocusing or displacement of that existing 5,000-a-year resettlement programme?

The Prime Minister

I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady, because I think that she has asked a question that has formed in many people's minds about the 5,000. Yes, indeed, the 5,000 extra in the resettlement scheme are additional to those already announced. We will support those people in coming to this country. We will also support the wider international community delivering humanitarian projects in the region by doubling the amount of humanitarian and development assistance that we had previously committed to Afghanistan this year with new funding— [Interruption]—wait for it—taking this up to £286 million with immediate effect. We call on others to work together on a shared humanitarian effort, focusing on helping the most vulnerable in what will be formidably difficult circumstances.

Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con)

I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way; he is being very generous with his time. Over the past 20 years, some 50 NATO and partner nations have been involved in Afghanistan. I welcome the measures that have been proposed by the UK and other countries such as the US, Canada, France, Germany and so on, but there are still many countries that have been involved in Afghanistan in recent years which have still yet to step up to the plate and recognise their responsibility in helping these people at this desperate time. Will the Prime Minister inform the House what is being done to encourage these other countries to take up their responsibility and help these people in Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and that is why the UK has chaired the UN Security Council, and asked with our French friends to put a motion together to get the world to focus on the humanitarian needs of Afghanistan. We will do

the same thing in NATO, the G7 and other bodies in which we have a leadership role. We want all these countries to step up, as he rightly said, and focus on the most vulnerable in what will be formidably difficult circumstances.

I have given way, I think you will agree, Mr Speaker, quite a lot this morning. Thanks to your generosity and that of the House, there is now ample time for debate until later this afternoon, and I think that many Members will be able to get their points across. I therefore intend, with your leave, Mr Speaker, to make some progress.

Fourthly, while we must focus on the region itself, we will also create safe and legal routes for those Afghans most in need to come and settle here in the UK. In addition to those Afghans with whom we have worked directly, I can announce today that we are committing to relocating another 5,000 Afghans this year, with a new and bespoke resettlement scheme focusing on the most vulnerable, particularly women and children. We will keep this under review for future years, with the potential of accommodating up to 20,000 over the long term. Taken together—

I have been very generous with interventions—I think you will agree, Mr Speaker—and I have made my position clear.

Taken together, we are committing almost half a billion pounds of humanitarian funding to support the Afghan people.

Fifthly, we must also face the reality of a change of regime in Afghanistan. As president of the G7, the UK will work to unite the international community behind a clear plan for dealing with this regime in a unified and concerted way. Over the last three days, I have spoken with the NATO and UN secretaries-general and with President Biden, Chancellor Merkel, President Macron and Prime Minister Khan. We are clear, and we have agreed, that it would be a mistake for any country to recognise any new regime in Kabul prematurely or bilaterally. Instead, those countries that care about Afghanistan's future should work towards common conditions about the conduct of the new regime before deciding together whether to recognise it, and on what terms.

We will judge this regime based on the choices it makes and by its actions rather than by its words—on its attitude to terrorism, crime and narcotics, as well as humanitarian access and the right of girls to receive an education. Defending human rights will remain of the highest priority, and we will use every available

political and diplomatic means to ensure that those human rights remain at the top of the international agenda.

Our United Kingdom has a roll-call of honour that bears the names of 457 servicemen and women who gave their lives in some of the world's harshest terrain, and many others who bear injuries to this day, fighting in what had become the epicentre of global terrorism. Even amid the heart-wrenching scenes we see today, I believe they should be proud of their achievements, and we should be deeply proud of them, because they conferred benefits that are lasting and ineradicable on millions of people in one of the poorest countries on earth, and they provided vital protection for two decades to this country and the rest of the world. They gave their all for our safety, and we owe it to them to give our all to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a breeding ground for terrorism.

No matter how grim the lessons of past, the future is not yet written. At this bleak turning point, we must help the people of Afghanistan to choose the best of all their possible futures. In the UN, the G7 and NATO, with friends and partners around the world, that is the critical task on which this Government are now urgently engaged and will be engaged in the days to come.

Mr Speaker

I suggest to Back Benchers that we will be starting with a seven-minute limit. I call the Leader of the Opposition.

10:08:00

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)

I thank you, Mr Speaker, and the staff for recalling Parliament for today's debate.

Before I come to the urgent issue at hand, let me join you, Mr Speaker, and the Prime Minister in condemning the appalling shootings in Plymouth last week. We all send our condolences to the bereaved families. We must resolve to ensure that firearms do not get into the hands of dangerous people, and finally get to grips with the way that hate thrives on the internet.

Turning to Afghanistan, it has been a disastrous week—an unfolding tragedy. Twenty years ago, the Taliban were largely in control of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda were using the country as a training ground and a base for terror, including plotting the horrific 9/11 attack. There were widespread human rights abuses,

girls were denied an education, women could not work and being gay was punishable by death—all imposed without democracy.

Since then, a fragile democracy emerged. It was by no means perfect, but no international terrorist attacks have been mounted from Afghanistan in that period. Women have gained liberty and won office, schools and clinics have been built, and Afghans have allowed themselves to dream of a better future. Those achievements were born of sacrifice—sacrifice by the Afghan people who bravely fought alongside their NATO allies, and British sacrifice.

More than 150,000 UK personnel have served in Afghanistan. They include Members from across this House, including the hon. and gallant Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), the hon. and gallant Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), and the hon. and gallant Members for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) and for Wells (James Heapey). They and the tens of thousands of others deployed in Afghanistan served in difficult and challenging circumstances, and the Labour party and—I am sure—everybody across this House thanks each and every one of them and of the 150,000. Many returned with life-changing injuries and, tragically, 457 did not return at all.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con)

Later today, I will attend the service at RAF Lyneham, outside Royal Wootton Bassett, to commemorate the 10th anniversary, which falls today, of the last repatriation through Bassett. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that the message to the people I will see today must be that those young lives were not wasted but played an absolutely essential role in deterring and destroying terrorism and carrying out so many other good works in Afghanistan?

Keir Starmer

I wholeheartedly agree with that point and will address it in one moment.

For many of those who returned from Afghanistan and other places around the world, mental health has been an all-too-familiar issue. It is raised by veterans time and again. The events of the past few days and weeks will have exacerbated the situation and reopened old wounds—everybody across this House will know of examples—so we must improve mental health services for our veterans.

On the point that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) just made, I wish to address directly all those who served in Afghanistan and their families—especially the families of those who were lost. Your sacrifice was not in vain—it was not in vain. You brought stability, reduced the terrorist threat and enabled progress. We are all proud of what you did. Your sacrifice deserves better than this, and so do the Afghan people.

There has been a major miscalculation of the resilience of the Afghan forces and staggering complacency from our Government about the Taliban threat. The result is that the Taliban are now back in control of Afghanistan. The gains made through 20 years of sacrifice hang precariously. Women and girls fear for their liberty. Afghan civilians are holding on to the undercarriage of NATO aircraft—literally clinging to departing hope. We face new threats to our security and an appalling humanitarian crisis.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)

For all the reasons that the right hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned, does he not agree that President Biden is actually wrong when he talks about American sacrifices in a civil war? The Taliban are not at war with a regime; they are at war with the civilised values of justice, equality and tolerance, which all of us hold dear, and against which it respects no international boundaries.

Keir Starmer

I agree with the hon. Member and thank him for that intervention.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)

Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer

Let me make some progress and then I will give way.

The desperate situation requires leadership and for the Prime Minister to snap out of his complacency. The most urgent task is the protection of our diplomatic staff still working heroically in Kabul, and the evacuation of British nationals and Afghans who have risked their lives. Let me be clear: the Labour party fully supports the deployment of troops to that end. We want it to succeed just as quickly and safely as possible.

The Defence Secretary has said that some people who have worked with us will not get back—unconscionable. The Government must outline a plan: to work with

our allies to do everything possible to ensure that that does not happen; to guarantee that our troops have the resources they need to carry out their mission as effectively and safely as possible; and to work to provide stable security at the airport in Kabul so that flights can depart and visas can be processed. We all know how difficult that is. We all know how hard everybody is working on the ground and we fully support them.

I raise an issue not by way of criticism, but just to get some reassurance: there are reports from non-governmental organisations that an evacuation plane left almost empty this morning because evacuees could not get to the airport to board that plane. As I say, we are not challenging the work on the ground—we know how difficult it is—but, if that is true, we would like to see that matter addressed at an appropriate moment.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)

May I take the right hon. and learned Gentleman back to the statement that the President of the United States made the other day? Does he not agree that that took on the terms of a sort of shameful excuse? Given that the President had blamed the Afghan armed forces, who have lost nearly 70,000 troops in trying to defend Afghanistan, and given that corruption had stripped away much of the pay, money and support of those forces, the American decision to withdraw aircraft cover was almost certainly going to lead us to this situation. Does he not think that that is shameful?

Keir Starmer

The US is, of course, an important ally, but to overlook the fighting of the Afghan troops and forces, and the fact that they have been at the forefront of that fighting in recent years, is wrong. It is wrong for any of us to overlook that or the situation in which they now find themselves.

The urgent task is, of course, the evacuation. Equally urgent is the immediate refugee crisis.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con)

Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer

I will make some progress and then I will give way.

Many Afghans have bravely sought to rebuild their country and they did so on a promise of democratic freedoms, the rule of law and liberty for the oppressed, including women and girls. They are our friends and that was our promise. They are now fearing for their lives. We do not turn our backs on friends at their time of need. We owe an obligation to the people of Afghanistan. There should be a resettlement scheme for people to rebuild their lives here, with safe and legal routes. It must be a resettlement scheme that meets the scale of the enormous challenge, but what the Government have announced this morning does not do that. It is vague and will support just 5,000 in the first year—a number without rationale. Was that based on a risk assessment of those most at need, or was it plucked out of the air? The offer to others is in the long term, but for those desperately needing our help now, there is no long term, just day-to-day survival.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)

Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that as well as marking the need for a much bolder and more ambitious resettlement programme, this disaster must mark a turning point for our failed asylum system, in particular by getting rid of the so-called hostile environment and the Nationality and Borders Bill, under which a woman fleeing the Taliban with her children on a boat across the channel would be criminalised? Does he agree that that Bill must now be revised?

Keir Starmer

I will come on to the specifics of the system. Yet again, the Government seem ill-prepared and unwilling, just as they have been too slow to provide sanctuary to Afghans who have served alongside Britain. There have been too many reports of eligible Afghans facing bureaucratic hurdles, and too many are being unfairly excluded. Having known for months that the date of withdrawal was coming, the Home Office is not close to completing the process that it has already got up and running. The process was designed to help 7,000 people, yet Home Office figures this week showed that only 2,000 have been helped so far.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)

The point that I wanted to make to the Prime Minister was about the situation facing Afghan Sikhs. I know from my constituency casework that there are Afghan Sikhs in the system who are waiting for clearance from the Home Office; I call on the Government to process them as quickly as possible and not leave all those people in the system waiting any longer than they have to at the moment. They are terrified by the idea of being sent back home, and despite the reassurance given to my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), I do not see any movement from the Home Office to give them the legal status that they need.

Keir Starmer

I am grateful for that intervention. Members on both sides of the House have given examples of individuals and groups who are very obviously at risk in Afghanistan and need to come out as quickly as possible. That is why the question arises as to what is behind the 5,000 number, and why others are having to wait so long.

The scale of the refugee crisis requires an international response, but we must lead it, and lead with a resettlement programme that meets the scale of the challenge. The scheme must be generous and welcoming. If it is not, we know the consequences now: violent reprisals in Afghanistan; people tragically fleeing into the arms of human traffickers—we know that that is what will happen—and more people risking and losing their lives on unsafe journeys, including across the English Channel. We cannot betray our friends. We must lead.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)

The right hon. and learned Gentleman speaks of people fleeing, but we have yet to assess whether anyone outside Kabul is able to get to a place of safety. Does he agree that a safe corridor needs to be opened to an international border so that those who are not near Kabul can also get to safety via third countries?

Keir Starmer

There is huge concern, as all hon. Members will know, about our line of sight beyond Kabul at the moment. Again, that calls into question where the 5,000 number comes from, because at the moment we are not even in a position to assess the position outside Kabul. We cannot betray our friends. We must lead.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)

Were the Government of this kingdom to be overthrown by a wicked and brutal regime, I venture that the right hon. and learned Gentleman would want a leading role in the resistance. He would not be queuing at the airport, would he?

Keir Starmer

When I was Director of Public Prosecutions, some of my prosecutors in Afghanistan were at huge risk, working on counter-terrorism with other brave souls there, so I will not take that from the right hon. Gentleman or from anybody else.

Once the immediate challenges are addressed, we face an uncertain and difficult future. The Taliban are back in control and we cannot be naive about the consequences. We have lost our primary source of leverage in political discussions, and everything that we have achieved in the past 20 years is now under threat.

I will make some progress and then give way.

The Prime Minister is right to say that we cannot allow Afghanistan to become a training ground for violent hate and terrorism, but that will be more difficult now that Afghanistan has descended into chaos. If preventing al-Qaeda camps is now the limit of our ambition, we are betraying 20 years of sacrifice by our armed forces and we are betraying the Afghan people, who cannot be left to the cruelty of the Taliban.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)

My right hon. and learned Friend speaks about the lack of ambition and urgency, and that summarises everything about the Government's approach to this crisis and many others. Is it not telling that when we had an Afghan Government whom we wanted to support, the UK Government cut the amount of overseas aid that we sent, but now that the Taliban are in charge, the Government are talking about increasing the amount of overseas aid?

Keir Starmer

I am grateful for that intervention. I will come to the question of aid in just a minute, because it is a very important point in the context of what has happened in recent weeks and months.

John Redwood

Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer

I am going to make some progress and then I will give way.

We have to use every tool that remains at our disposal to protect human rights in Afghanistan. The Government are right not to recognise the Taliban as the official Government—the Prime Minister has made that clear—but that must be part of a wider strategy, developed with our UN security partners and our NATO allies, to apply pressure on the Taliban not only to stamp out a resurgence of terror groups, but to retain the liberties and human rights of Afghans. We must work with

Afghans and neighbours to ensure that there is consistent pressure, and there must be a UN-backed plan to ensure that our aid budget is used to support humanitarian causes in Afghanistan, not to fund the Taliban.

This is a difficult task with no guarantee of success, so it should concern us all that the Prime Minister's judgment on Afghanistan has been appalling. Nobody believes that Britain and our allies could have remained in Afghanistan indefinitely, or that Britain could have fought alone. NATO leaders were put in a difficult position after President Trump agreed with the Taliban that all US forces would withdraw by May 2021. But that agreement was made in February 2020—18 months ago. We have had 18 months to prepare and plan for the consequences of what followed—to plan and to prepare for the resettlement of refugees and those who have supported us; for supporting the Afghan Government in managing the withdrawal; and for securing international and regional pressure on the Taliban and support for the Afghan Government. The very problems we are confronting today have been known problems for the last 18 months, and there has been a failure of preparation.

The lack of planning is unforgivable, and the Prime Minister bears a heavy responsibility. He mutters today, but he was in a position to lead and he did not. Britain holds a seat at the United Nations Security Council. We are a key player in NATO. We are chair of the G7. Every one of those platforms could and should have been used to prepare for the withdrawal of forces, and to rally international support behind a plan to stabilise Afghanistan through the process and keep us safe.

I will give way in a minute.

Did the Prime Minister use those platforms in those 18 months to prepare? No, he did not. What did he do instead? We debated this: he cut the development budget, which was key to the strength and resilience of democracy in Afghanistan. He makes a great deal today of the money he is putting in, but £292 million was spent in Afghanistan in 2019, and £155 million in 2021. That is short-sighted, small-minded and a threat to security.

I will give way in a moment, but I am going to go through this list. The right hon. Gentleman failed to visit Afghanistan as Prime Minister, meaning that his last trip—as Foreign Secretary, in 2018—was not to learn or to push British interests, but to avoid a vote on Heathrow. Hundreds of thousands of British people have flown to Afghanistan to serve; the Prime Minister flew to avoid public service.

The list goes on. In March this year the Prime Minister published an integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy. It was a huge review. He boasted that the review would

“demonstrate to our allies, in Europe and beyond, that they can always count on the UK when it really matters.”

The Afghan Government were an ally, yet the integrated review made just two passing references to Afghanistan. The review did not even mention the Taliban. It did not mention NATO withdrawal or the consequences of the Doha agreement. It did cut the size of the Army—the very force that we are now relying on—and we criticised that at the time. Eye off the ball; astonishingly careless. The question is: why was the Prime Minister so careless? Why did he fail to lead? It comes down to complacency and poor judgment.

I will give way in a moment; I am going to make this case.

There was a calculation that withdrawal would lead to military stalemate in Afghanistan and that that stalemate would accelerate political discussions. Seeing this in July, Members on both sides of this House warned the Government—read Hansard—that they may be underestimating the threat of the Taliban. That was ignored, and the Government’s preparation for withdrawal was based on a miscalculation of the resilience of the Afghan forces and a staggering complacency about the Taliban threat.

The Prime Minister is as guilty as anyone. This Sunday he said:

“We’ve known for a long time that this was the way things were going”.

That was not what he told the House in July, when he stood there and assured Members that

“there is no military path to victory for the Taliban”,

and went on to say:

“I do not think that the Taliban are capable of victory by military means”. —
[Official Report, 8 July 2021; Vol. 698, c. 1108, 1112.]

The British Government were wrong and complacent, the Prime Minister was wrong and complacent and, when he was not rewriting history, the Prime Minister was displaying the same appalling judgment and complacency last week.

The British ambassador's response to the Taliban arriving at the gates of Kabul was to personally process the paperwork for those who needed to flee. He is still there and we thank him and his staff. The Prime Minister's response to the Taliban arriving at the gates of Kabul was to go on holiday—no sense of the gravity of the situation; no leadership to drive international efforts on the evacuation. The Foreign Secretary shakes his head. [Interruption.] What would I do differently? I would not stay on holiday while Kabul was falling. There are numerous examples of leaders on both sides of the House who have come back immediately in a time of crisis. [Interruption.] The Foreign Secretary is shouting now, but he was silent— [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. The Prime Minister was heard and I want to hear the Leader of the Opposition. I do not want people to shout. You may disagree, but you may also wish to catch my eye. Do not ruin that chance.

Keir Starmer

The Foreign Secretary shouts now, but he stayed on holiday while our mission in Afghanistan was disintegrating. He did not even speak to ambassadors in the region as Kabul fell to the Taliban. Let that sink in. You cannot co-ordinate an international response from the beach. This was a dereliction of duty by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, and a Government totally unprepared for the scenario that they had 18 months to prepare for.

It is one thing for people to lose trust in the Prime Minister at home, but when the trust in the word of our Prime Minister is questioned abroad, there are serious consequences for our safety and security at home.

Andrew Bridgen

Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer

In one moment.

Recent events in Afghanistan shame the west—and not just the scenes of chaos. What does our abandonment of the Afghan people say to those brave people

around the world living under regimes that pay scant regard to human rights but resisting those regimes in pursuit of democracy, equality and individual freedom? What does this retreat from freedom signal to those who are prepared to stand up for it? What does this surrender to extremism mean for those prepared to face it down? What does it mean for those nations who support an international rules-based system when we hand over power to those who recognise no rules at all? That is the challenge of our time.

The British and Afghan people will have to live with the consequences of the Prime Minister's failure. We have fought for 20 years to rid Afghanistan of terror—terror that threatens our security here in Britain and liberty in Afghanistan. The Taliban are back in control. The Prime Minister has no plan to handle the situation, just as he had no plan to prevent it. What we won through 20 years of sacrifice could all be lost. That is the cost of careless leadership.

10:36:00

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con)

I had the opportunity to visit Afghanistan twice, but I recognise that there are others across this House whose experience is more recent, more vivid, more practical, and longer and broader than mine. But when I was there, I was struck by the commitment and dedication of our armed forces serving there and of other British personnel. All were doing what they could to give hope to the people of Afghanistan—people who, thanks to our presence, were able to enjoy freedoms they had been denied under the Taliban.

Twenty years on, 457 British military personnel have died in Afghanistan, and many more have suffered life-changing injuries. Yes, many girls have been educated because of British aid, but it is not just that the freedoms once enjoyed will now be taken away; many, many Afghans—not just those who worked with British forces—are now in fear of their lives. It is right that we should open up a refugee scheme, but we must make absolutely certain that it is accessible to all those who need it.

Of course, the NATO presence was always going to end at some point in time, but the withdrawal, when it came, was due to be orderly, planned and on the basis of conditions. It has been none of those. What has been most shocking is the chaos and the speed of the takeover by the Taliban. In July of this year, both President Biden and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister indicated that they did not think that the Taliban were ready or able to take over control of the country. Was our

intelligence really so poor? Was our understanding of the Afghan Government so weak? Was our knowledge of the position on the ground so inadequate? Did we really believe that, or did we just feel that we had to follow the United States and hope that, on a wing and a prayer, it would be all right on the night?

The reality is that as long as a time limit and dates were given for withdrawal, all the Taliban had to do was ensure that there were sufficient problems for the Afghan Government not to be able to have full control of the country, and then just sit and wait.

John Redwood

Does my right hon. Friend agree that President Biden decided unilaterally to withdraw without agreeing and negotiating a plan with either the Afghan Government or the NATO allies, and that the response of the UK Government in the circumstances has been fast, purposeful and extremely well guided to protect the interests of UK citizens?

Mrs May

What President Biden has done is to uphold a decision made by President Trump. It was a unilateral decision of President Trump to do a deal with the Taliban that led to this withdrawal.

What we have seen from the scenes in Afghanistan is that it has not been all right on the night. There are many in Afghanistan who not only fear that their lives will be irrevocably changed for the worse, but fear for their lives. Numbered among them will be women—women who embraced freedom and the right to education, to work and to participate in the political process.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was right to make the education of girls a key aim of his Administration, but in Afghanistan that will now be swept away. Those girls who have been educated will have no opportunity to use that education. The Taliban proclaims that women will be allowed to work and girls will be allowed to go to school, but this will be under Islamic law—or rather, under its interpretation of Islamic law, and we have seen before what that means for the lives of women and girls.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)

Some of the women who have shown most courage are the 250 women who serve as judges under the attempt that was made to impose a decent, honest legal system on Afghanistan. There is a particular fear that they are targets. The Bar

Council and the Law Society have asked the Government to take cognizance of the particular risks they run. Will my right hon. Friend support the call for them to be given priority in being brought to safety, since they put their lives on the line for their fellow women and for their whole country?

Mrs May

My hon. Friend makes an important point. As has been said, there are many groups in Afghanistan who have put their lives on the line to support the Afghan Government, democracy and justice in Afghanistan, and it is right that we should do everything we can to support them in their time of need. However, as we know, under the Taliban regime the life of women and girls will sadly not be the same; they will not have the rights we believe they should have or the freedoms they should have.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)

There are already reports from sources in Kabul that the Taliban is executing collaborators and homosexuals. Does the right hon. Lady agree that complacency is absolutely misplaced, and what does she suggest we do to protect those people who need to get out?

Mrs May

The Government are doing much to protect people in trying to ensure that people can access ways of leaving Afghanistan. A point was made earlier about not just expecting people to get to Kabul, and I hope that is something the Government will be able to look into and take up.

Apart from the impact on the lives of women and girls, we see a potential humanitarian crisis, at least in some parts of Afghanistan. We have cut our international aid budget, but I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary has told me that more funding will be made available to deal with this crisis.

It is not just the impact on the people of Afghanistan that must concern us, however; we must be deeply concerned about the possible impact here in the UK. The aim of our involvement in Afghanistan was to ensure that it could not be used as a haven for terrorists who could train, plot, and encourage attacks in the UK. Al-Qaeda has not gone away. Daesh may have lost ground in Syria, but those terrorist groups remain and have spawned others. We will not defeat them until we have defeated the ideology that feeds their extremism.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)

One of the most concerning things that is happening is that several thousand al-Qaeda operatives have been freed from prisons in Bagram, Kabul and Kandahar. Is my right hon. Friend concerned that those people will go back to their old ways, or do we hope that they will somehow go into retirement? It seems to me that we are going to restart with a new round of international terrorism.

Mrs May

My hon. Friend has anticipated exactly the point I was about to make. The Taliban has said that it will not allow Afghanistan to become a haven for terrorists again. Yesterday, in the press conference, it said it would not allow anything to happen in Afghanistan that would lead to attacks elsewhere across the world. However, we must look at its actions, not its words, and, as he has just pointed out, its action has been to release thousands of high-value Taliban, al-Qaeda and Daesh fighters. Its actions are completely different from its words, and it is essential that we recognise the probability that Afghanistan will once again become a breeding ground for the terrorists who seek to destroy our way of life.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

The right hon. Lady is making exactly the points that I hoped to hear from the Prime Minister and did not. The reasons that we went into Afghanistan in 2001 remain valid today. If the actions taken in recent weeks render a military solution to that problem impossible, we have to have a non-military solution. What does she see that non-military solution as being?

Mrs May

I will refer to that issue later. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the question of a military solution has not been there for some time, because our combat mission ended some years ago, but we have been trying to provide support to enable a democratic Government to take proper control of that country. I would be happy to talk to him sometime about my views. I think that we should possibly have reconsidered the idea of trying to impose a western example of democracy in a country that is geographically difficult and relies a lot on regional government when we were going down that route, but I will not go down that road any longer, despite his temptations.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)

rose—

Mr Speaker

Order. I am really concerned about the time for Back Benchers. I did suggest that it was seven minutes, and we are now heading to 10. I did not put a time limit on, but I will have to do so after this speech.

Mrs May

I am very grateful for your generosity to me, Mr Speaker.

Another important element of our work in Afghanistan was stopping drugs coming into the United Kingdom. Sadly, that has not been as successful as we would have liked, but we supported a drug crime-specific criminal justice system in Afghanistan, and I assume that will now come to a complete end. Once again, that is another area where withdrawal is not just about Afghanistan but has an impact on the streets of the UK.

What must also be a key concern to us is the message that this decision sends around the world to those who would do the west harm—the message that it sends about our capabilities and, most importantly, about our willingness to defend our values. What does it say about us as a country—what does it say about NATO?—if we are entirely dependent on a unilateral decision taken by the United States? We all understand the importance of American support, but despite the comments from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, I find it incomprehensible and worrying that the United Kingdom was not able to bring together not a military solution but an alternative alliance of countries to continue to provide the support necessary to sustain a Government in Afghanistan.

Surely one outcome of this decision must be a reassessment of how NATO operates. NATO is the bedrock of European security, but Russia will not be blind to the implications of this withdrawal decision and the manner in which it was taken. Neither will China and others have failed to notice the implications. In recent years, the west has appeared to be less willing to defend its values. That cannot continue. If it does, it will embolden those who do not share those values and wish to impose their way of life on others. I am afraid that this has been a major setback for British foreign policy. We boast about global Britain, but where is global Britain on the streets of Kabul? A successful foreign policy strategy will be judged by our deeds, not by our words.

I finally just say this: all our military personnel, all who served in Afghanistan, should hold their heads high and be proud of what they achieved in that country over 20 years, of the change of life that they brought to the people of Afghanistan

and of the safety that they brought here to the UK. The politicians sent them there. The politicians decided to withdraw. The politicians must be responsible for the consequences.

10:48:00

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for facilitating the recall of Parliament. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), and I hope the Government will reflect very carefully on her words—particularly her remarks at the end of her contribution about the role of NATO in the light of the American decision to pull out of Afghanistan. These are very real issues about the capabilities within NATO. If I may say so, it is about not just the capability of NATO but how we make sure the United Nations has all the tools at its disposal to do what we expect of it. We will have to return to these matters in this House when we come back from recess.

I thank the Government for the briefings we have had over the course of the last few days, and in particular I commend the Defence Secretary for making himself available and for how he has conducted himself. Indeed, that is also true of Ministers in the Home Office—I think particularly of the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and, from the Foreign Office, the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa. When we are talking about human lives being lost, it is important that we in this House work together where it is possible but—yes, of course—that we ask legitimate questions.

There can be little doubt that the chaos and crisis that has been inflicted on the Afghan people is the biggest foreign policy failure of modern times. The sheer scale of that political failure is matched only by the humanitarian emergency that it has now unleashed. As we gather here this morning, the future and fate of Afghanistan has never been more uncertain. Afghanistan, a country that has been through so much, is once again facing a period of darkness. Over the course of the past week we have watched those tragic images from afar. The scenes of Afghans seeking to jump on to moving planes to escape will haunt us for the rest of our lives. We have watched from afar, but we all have a deep sense of sorrow about just how closely the UK has been involved in what has unfolded. Geographical distance does not for a second diminish the moral responsibility that we need to feel for the west's role in this crisis. Washing our hands of this crisis will not make it go away, and it definitely will not wash away our responsibility to the Afghan

people. We all know that acting now will be too little, too late, but better little and late than nothing at all.

Today we have a choice: we can either offer meaningless words of sympathy and stand idly by, or we can start to do the right thing. We can take responsibility and act. The Home Secretary has today talked about evacuating more contacts of the UK Afghanistan operation from the existing resettlement scheme. Let me be clear: there should be no ifs or buts; everyone who has worked with UK forces and who by definition has a vulnerability, must be moved to a position of safety. No one can be left behind. That is our moral and ethical responsibility. All those who work with us are our responsibility. We do not, we cannot, walk away from them. Today I am asking the Government to make that commitment.

That action needs to begin with a co-ordinated domestic and international effort to offer safe passage, shelter and support to refugees fleeing this crisis is obvious. That action cannot wait. If we are to act, we must act with the same speed with which the situation in Afghanistan has developed. I am sad that the scheme announced last night by the UK Government, and today by the Prime Minister, does not go nearly far or fast enough. It can only be right that the number of refugees we welcome here reflects the share of the responsibility that the UK Government have for this foreign policy disaster. This scheme falls way short of that responsibility. The scheme must be far more ambitious, generous, and swift to help the Afghan citizens that it has abandoned and left at serious risk of persecution, and indeed death. The scale of the efforts must match the scale of the humanitarian emergency.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)

Considering that the Government promised in 2016 to save 3,000 unaccompanied refugee children from Calais, is the right hon. Gentleman concerned that the number who have actually been saved stands at around 380? If those promises can be broken, and among those children were many from Afghanistan, is he concerned that the promises made today may be as unrobust as those of the past?

Ian Blackford

I agree with the right hon. Lady that it is important the House has the opportunity to reflect on this and consider what mechanisms we need to put in place to protect people in Afghanistan.

The harsh reality is that 3 million people have already been displaced, and 80% of those fleeing their homes are women and children. These people are now crying out for our help.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)

My right hon. Friend will be aware that yesterday the Nobel laureate Nadia Murad said:

“I know what happens when the world loses sight of women and girls in crises. When it looks away, war is waged on women’s bodies.”

Sadly, she is correct. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if we do not act now and go so much further than the Government are proposing to protect women and girls, this political disaster will become a catastrophic moral failure?

Ian Blackford

I agree with my hon. Friend.

I just reflected on the fact that 3 million people have already been displaced. We need to show a generosity of spirit that recognises the scale of the challenge we face, so that women do not face the loss of their human rights, so that women do not face persecution and, yes, so that women do not face even worse, including death.

It is important to say that, if we are to support the Afghan people, this crisis needs to mark a point of fundamental change in this Government’s approach to refugees. In the past few months alone, this Government have introduced a hateful anti-refugee Bill that would rip up international conventions and criminalise those coming from Afghanistan in need of our refuge. The UK Government have spent a sizeable part of their summer making political play of turning away migrants and refugees in small boats who are desperately making their way across the channel.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con)

Given that Glasgow is the only city and authority in Scotland to be part of the resettlement scheme up until now, will the SNP stick to their rhetoric and start putting forward other authority areas to be part of the resettlement scheme?

Ian Blackford

My goodness, my goodness, my goodness. I do not think the hon. Gentleman has been listening to anything we have been saying over the past few days. I will talk about this in more detail, because I have been asking for the resettlement scheme to work on the basis of the Syrian scheme that we had in the last decade. I tell the House that the Scottish Government stand ready to work with the UK Government—[Interruption.] We are talking about people who are facing extreme risk, and that is what we get from the Government Benches. They should be careful, because people in the United Kingdom, and perhaps people in Afghanistan, are listening. Perhaps a bit of dignity from the Government Benches would not go amiss.

I want to make sure that every local authority in Scotland has the opportunity to take refugees from Afghanistan, and that is precisely the position of the Government in Scotland, but it has to come with the Government in London and the devolved Administrations working together. There has to be a summit of the four nations to discuss exactly how this will work.

Alan Brown

Just to correct the record, my local authority, East Ayrshire Council, has resettled Syrian refugees.

Brendan O'Hara

As has mine.

Alan Brown

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) should correct the record.

Ian Blackford

My hon. Friend is correct, and my area of the highlands has refugees from Syria, too, and they were made most welcome by the community. In view of the hostile environment that we are seeing once again from the Conservative party, let us reflect on the fact that these are people who came here to receive sanctuary and who have gone on to make a contribution to our life. They were welcome, refugees are welcome and Afghans are certainly welcome in every part of Scotland.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab)

Before the right hon. Gentleman was rerouted by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), he was making a powerful point about those who come across the channel in boats, and the Government's proposals for them. Does he recognise that, according to organisations such as Safe Passage, 70% of the unaccompanied minors crossing the channel come from Afghanistan, and to criminalise them is a criminal act in itself?

Ian Blackford

Yes, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The Government must reflect carefully on this over the course of the summer, and change their ways before we come back and debate these matters again.

I will make some progress before giving way again.

We have just had it demonstrated that the hostile attitude and approach to refugees truly exists and extends to those from Afghanistan. Since the most recent conflict began, in 2001, the Home Office has rejected asylum for 32,000 Afghans, including 875 girls. The total number of Afghans in the system stands at 3,117, so if we are to have any confidence that this is a turning point, this UK Government need to rethink radically how they respond to the refugee crisis unfolding before our eyes.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con)

No one in this House can fail to be moved by the scenes from Afghanistan we are seeing on our television screens, and I am delighted to hear that the Scottish Government stand ready to do their part. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm how many refugees the Scottish Government are ready to resettle?

Ian Blackford

I will discuss that a little later on—[Interruption.] I have to say to Government Members that these are serious issues. I welcome the hon. Member's intervention, and I will give the real-life example of what happened with Syria. Scotland took 15% of the refugees who came from Syria—

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP)

Twenty per cent.

Ian Blackford

Twenty per cent.—so we have done our bit, and we stand ready to do our bit again. I commit myself as leader of the SNP here, and I commit my Government to work with the Government here in London—but they have to extend the hand of friendship to us.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

Let us hope that refugees do not become a political football in this place. All of us—all of us—care desperately about giving these people safe haven. We welcome them in the highlands, we welcome them everywhere, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the proper finance to support our local authorities must be forthcoming from the UK Government and the Scottish Government, because without it our councils will struggle?

Ian Blackford

Yes, I agree, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention because I know that he will associate himself with me in saying that we will extend 100,000 welcomes to those who wish to come to the highlands of Scotland.

We have called for a four-nations summit to integrate our efforts across the United Kingdom. I hope that the Prime Minister will respond positively and take the opportunity to meet the devolved Administrations to discuss this. Perhaps he will indicate now that he is happy to do that.

*The Prime Minister
indicated assent.*

Ian Blackford

We have it on the record that the Prime Minister is happy to do that—that he is happy to have a four-nations summit. I am grateful.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP)

There has been much focus today on making sure we offer sanctuary for people from Afghanistan, but last night I was speaking to my Carmyle constituent Mohammad Asif, who is originally from Afghanistan. He wants to make sure that we also offer humanitarian protection to those who are already seeking asylum in the City of Glasgow. On the point made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), yes, the City of Glasgow has done its fair share to welcome refugees and we stand ready to do a lot more, but I have to say to him that 30

refugees per parliamentary constituency is a paltry number that he should be ashamed of.

Ian Blackford

At the end of the day, it is important that we all do what we can. I commend Glasgow City Council and Glasgow's MPs and MSPs, but it is the people of Glasgow who have done so much to welcome asylum seekers to their city.

We believe that the resettlement scheme should emulate and exceed the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. It must also be enacted and deployed much more quickly than the Syrian scheme. Afghan refugees should not—and cannot—wait for up to five years for safety. They need safe passage and they need it now. The scheme should be open to Afghans who supported UK Government-funded programmes and who worked for the UK and other international organisations. It should have a minimum commitment to welcome at least 35,000 to 40,000 Afghan refugees in the UK, in line with the population share of refugees welcomed from Syria.

Three thousand of those Syrian refugees have made Scotland their new home. They have contributed to our economy and our communities. They were Syrians; they are now part of Scotland's story. They are our friends and neighbours. It is only right that we offer the same warmth and welcome to Afghan refugees facing the same dangerous and desperate situation.

The crisis has thrown into sharp focus the disaster of the overseas development cuts, which were rammed through before the summer recess. When the Prime Minister talks about the increase in spending in Afghanistan, it still does not take us to the level of spending that was previously committed. The cuts to overseas aid were immoral and shameful before this humanitarian emergency. It is now a policy—

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab)

You don't listen.

Ian Blackford

Do I not listen? I am afraid that the person who is not listening—maybe he is still on holiday—is the Foreign Secretary. You have not taken the spending back to the level where it was. [Interruption.] No, you are not doubling it.

Mr Speaker

Order. We do not use “you”, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows, because I do not take responsibility, and he would not expect me to.

Ian Blackford

You certainly do not want to take responsibility for a Foreign Secretary who cannot realise the facts of the matter. You have taken spending to below where it previously was. If you cannot accept that, you cannot even count.

Mr Speaker

Order. The right hon. Gentleman keeps using “you”. He must come through me. I am the Chair. The Foreign Secretary is not the Chair.

Ian Blackford

Indeed, Mr Speaker.

It is important that the cuts to overseas aid are reversed in their entirety. [Interruption.] I know that the Foreign Secretary is trying to wind me up. When the rest of us were doing what we could in the past few days, he was lying on a sunbed, so I will not take any lectures from someone like him. People are facing the worst situation imaginable and we have a Foreign Secretary who sits laughing and joking on the Government Front Bench. He should be ashamed of himself. He demonstrates that he has no dignity whatsoever. He can carry on saying that the amount has been doubled—

Bob Seely

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We have had 20 minutes of speech and we now have a private conversation between Front Benchers. Should we not be debating the subject, Sir?

Mr Speaker

That is for me to decide and I have referred twice to both sides trying to antagonise each other, which is not a good idea. Whichever Front Bench it is, they should not be responding. I am sure that Mr Blackford is coming to the end of his speech. He did say that he would not take too long.

Ian Blackford

Mr Speaker, this is an important matter. Aid spending in Afghanistan is still below what it was meant to be and the Foreign Secretary does not have the decency to understand and accept that. It just shows that he is out of touch with what people

want, in the House and across these islands. Perhaps the Foreign Secretary will get a chance to intervene later on, but continuing to chunter from a sedentary position shows, really, that he has no dignity. He ought to have some self-respect.

When it comes to aid, it is telling to reflect on the chasm between the amount invested in this conflict and the amount invested in development. Since 2001, the UK Government have spent around £27.7 billion on military operations in Afghanistan. Over the same period, they have spent approximately £3.8 billion in aid. That amounts to eight times as much spending on military action as on supporting communities or helping to rebuild the country. Those figures alone should make this House seriously reflect on all the priorities, policies and political decisions that have ultimately resulted in this failure, and the failure rests on the shoulders of the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary. Billions have been invested to support these failed military decisions, and it is the Afghan people who are left paying the ultimate price.

I have concentrated my remarks on the here and now because we understand that the immediate priority must be to do everything that we can to protect lives. But in time there must also be a chance to review how the UK's involvement in the region went so badly wrong. It is right to put on record today that there must be a future judge-led inquiry into the war in Afghanistan. We owe that to the brave men and women in our military who were sent there—many of them not returning; many of them making the ultimate sacrifice. Let me thank each and every one of those who have given so much to secure peace in Afghanistan.

As we exit Afghanistan, it is our forces that have to go back to facilitate our departure, putting themselves on the frontline once again. It is little wonder that so many of our service personnel and their families are asking what their involvement in Afghanistan was for. We have let Afghanistan down by the nature of our departure, but we have also let down our military. We should salute each and every one of them. They are right to be angry at the political failure. We owe that inquiry, too, to the many professionals and volunteers who were led to believe that they were there to support the Afghan people in building their nation; and we owe it to the future that such a massive foreign policy failure is never again repeated.

It is clear that Afghanistan did not go from relative stability to chaos overnight. The current situation is an acceleration of an existing state of affairs, of which the UK, the US and the Afghan Governments were seemingly unaware. The exit strategy was not properly planned, so it appears that the only people who were

planning were the Taliban. There remain so many massive questions for the Prime Minister and his Government. How did the 300,000 men of the Afghan national defence and security forces seemingly vanish overnight? Why was so much trust placed in an Afghan Government that disintegrated the moment that foreign troops left? Why did the UK Government not push for a United Nations-led exit strategy, rather than silently sitting on the sidelines as the US made their decisions? Although history may well cast the final verdict on many of these questions and decisions, we also need the answers and accountability that only a judge-led inquiry can ultimately bring.

I began my remarks by saying that we are witnessing a humanitarian emergency from afar, but the sad reality is that this is by no means close to the first tragedy experienced by the Afghan nation. The story of Afghanistan is of a country and a people torn apart by tragedy time and time again.

Over the years, great powers and vast armies have come and gone. It is the Afghan people who have always been left behind. There is, sadly, no evacuation and no escape for them from foreign policy failure. I am sure that many Afghan citizens simply see a cycle endlessly repeating itself. As an international community, we have collectively wronged these poor people for the best part of a century.

We asked the citizens of Afghanistan to work with us. We watched as girls were able to receive an education, as women were able to excel in so many fields, so that a light could be lit, pointing a path to a brighter future for so many to benefit from freedom of opportunity. That light has been extinguished. The future for so many women and girls is dark and forbidding. We have let them down. It is time to do the right thing. For those deserving and in need of our aid and our support, now is the moment to act; now is the moment for leadership.

Mr Speaker

I am now starting the seven-minute limit. I say to hon. Members: please think of others and try to see if you can shorten your speech, so we can get as many as possible in today.

11:15:00

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con)

While the best still apply to join our Royal Navy, the Army, the Royal Marines and the Royal Air Force, we can have hope for the future. We weep for the losses; we acknowledge mistakes; we will remember them. When I, like other MPs, have

visited our armed forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Falklands and the former Yugoslavia, I was with ordinary people, working together to achieve remarkable results, of significance to us and often of lifesaving importance to others.

Those who were here for the Saturday debate on the Falklands found, I think, a rather different style of debate, when people were united on what we ought to try to achieve. As Enoch Powell said, the reason to intervene in the Falklands was not that we were guaranteed to succeed, but that the mission was capable of success. That would not have been the case if we were trying to resist, say, China taking Hong Kong.

Our experience in Afghanistan in the 19th century, and in the 20 years' conflict that has now come to an end, will make people think about whether what was aimed for in Afghanistan after the initial targets were achieved was going to have an end that could be happy or content. I do not think it was an example of trying to resist nationalism, because the forces within Afghanistan are multifarious and have their histories, which I will not go into now.

The second debate, which I have read up on a number of times during my parliamentary service, was the Norway debate, where again there were some speeches of most remarkable intelligence and experience, and others that, frankly, I think people should have been slightly ashamed of. We have to learn that what this Parliament can do is not to be Government but to try to question Government, support Government where appropriate, and get them to change at times.

On the question whether there should be an inquiry, it would be interesting to hear the views of the Chairmen of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees, either today or some other time, because I think that would be useful.

I do not want to spend too much time, because I want to make up some of the time that was used by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who when he said he was concentrating seems to have lost his concentration once or twice, and when he said he was being wound up, some of us thought ought to have been wound down. [Laughter.]

The key issues are obvious: what is happening now, what happens now and then what lessons can be learned. On what is happening now, the reports given by Ministers both in this House and to Members of Parliament across the Chamber are important and valuable; please can those continue? What can happen will be

determined in large part by those who are presently in command in Afghanistan — whether they control Afghanistan is a separate issue—but people may look back and say that the speed of transition, in the end, might have been better than a prolonged start to a civil war. But that is in the future; we cannot judge that and I will not try to do that.

I end by saying this. If we decide that we are not going to get involved in world affairs, the world will be worse. If we decide that we are going to have the capability to work with others when we can, and occasionally on our own, that is fine. But as a Parliament, we ought to be aware that we probably made a mistake in backing Government over one of the Iraq wars. In my view we certainly made a mistake in not backing Government over Syria. If we look at the number of people who have died in Syria and the number of refugees around the world and make the comparison with Afghanistan, I think we probably should be ashamed of our vote over Syria.

I stop now, as an example to others.

11:19:00

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)

It is an honour to follow the Father of the House.

I strongly agree with what was said by the Leader of the Opposition and by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who speaks with the experience of having served as Prime Minister. I particularly agree with what she said about the threat of terrorism and the need fully to reinstate our aid budget, the issues for NATO and the proud legacy of our troops.

We have all looked on in horror as the events in Afghanistan have unfolded. I join everyone who is urging the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary to do everything they can to help UK nationals, including my constituents, who are stranded and in hiding in Kabul, desperately needing to get back home to the UK. We urgently need to evacuate those who worked with us, who thereby feel that they are vulnerable and to whom we have a moral obligation. The Government are setting up a refugee resettlement programme. I urge them to make a realistic and generous assessment of the scale of the need and to work with all local authorities that want to play their part in giving a warm welcome to those who are fleeing. The Government also need to work, of course, with NATO countries and more widely on an international resettlement programme.

We need to think about those who cannot or do not want to leave, particularly women and girls. When the Taliban were last in control, there were literally no girls in school. Now—at least, up until the Taliban took over again—40% of schoolchildren are girls; over the last 20 years, there has been a whole generation of girls who have been educated, and a whole cohort of young women who have been able to work and want to continue to do so.

When the Taliban were last in control, there were no women in public life—no women to speak up for other women. Women were silenced. Now there are 69 women Afghan MPs. Indeed, three years ago, one of them—Elay Ershad—came to this Chamber to speak from the Front Bench while participating in our Women MPs of the World conference, and was welcomed by the former Prime Minister to No. 10 Downing Street. The President has fled but Elay is staying in Kabul with her daughters, in solidarity, she says, with her people. What courage. The Afghan army has retreated, but so many Afghan women are standing their ground. All those women politicians and activists are determined not to let the progress of the last two decades be crushed. They now face great jeopardy. I know that the whole House, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary will express publicly our solidarity with and admiration for Afghan women MPs, who, as parliamentary pioneers—having stepped forward into public life to make a reality of democracy for that half of the population of Afghanistan who are women and girls—are now, in the face of such an uncertain future, determined to protect and defend those rights.

As to what we can do, I would say: do not just listen to the male leaders about what we need to do for women. I say to the Foreign Secretary, do not just speak to the men; pick up the phone to those women Afghan MPs, ask them what we can do to support women and girls in Afghanistan, and then do it.

11:23:00

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)

Like many veterans, this last week has seen me struggle through anger, grief and rage—through the feeling of abandonment of not just a country, but the sacrifice that my friends made. I have been to funerals from Poole to Dunblane. I have watched good men go into the earth, taking with them a part of me and a part of all of us. This week has torn open some of those wounds, has left them raw and left us all hurting. And I know it is not just soldiers; I know aid workers and diplomats who feel the same. I know journalists who have been witnesses to our

country in its heroic effort to save people from the most horrific fates. I know that we have all been struggling. If this recall has done one thing, it has achieved one thing already. I have spoken to the Health Secretary, who has already made a commitment to do more for veterans' mental health. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."]

This is not just about us. The mission in Afghanistan was not a British mission—it was a NATO mission. It was a recognition that globalisation has changed us all. The phone calls that I am still receiving, the text messages that I have been answering as I have been waiting, putting people in touch with our people in Afghanistan, remind us that we are connected still today, and Afghanistan is not a far country about which we know little. It is part of the main. That connection links us also to our European partners, to our European neighbours and to our international friends, so it is with great sadness that I now criticise one of them, because I was never prouder than when I was decorated by the 82nd Airborne after the capture of Musa Qala. It was a huge privilege to be recognised by such an extraordinary unit in combat. To see their commander-in-chief call into question the courage of men I fought with, to claim that they ran, is shameful. Those who have never fought for the colours they fly should be careful about criticising those who have. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."]

What we have done in these last few days is demonstrate that it is not armies that win wars. Armies can get tactical victories and operational victories that can hold the line; they can just about make room for peace—make room for people like us to talk, to compromise, to listen. It is nations that make war; nations endure; nations mobilise and muster; nations determine and have patience. Here we have demonstrated, sadly, that we—the west, the United Kingdom—do not.

This is a harsh lesson for all of us, and if we are not careful, it could be a very, very difficult lesson for our allies, but it does not need to be. We can set out a vision, clearly articulated, for reinvigorating our European NATO partners, to make sure that we are not dependent on a single ally, on the decision of a single leader, but that we can work together—with Japan and Australia, with France and Germany, with partners large and small—and make sure that we hold the line together. Because we know that patience wins. We know it because we have achieved it; we know it because we have delivered it. The cold war was won with patience; Cyprus is at peace, with patience; South Korea, with more than 10 times the number of troops that America had in Afghanistan, is prosperous through patience. So let us stop talking about forever wars. Let us recognise that forever peace is bought, not cheaply, but hard, through determination and the will to

endure. The tragedy of Afghanistan is that we are swapping that patient achievement for a second fire and a second war.

Now we need to turn our attention to those who are in desperate need, supporting the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme and so many other organisations that can do so much for people in the region. Yes, of course I support refugees, although I am not going to get into the political auction of numbers. We just need to get people out.

I leave the House with one image. In the year that I was privileged to be the adviser to the governor of Helmand, we opened girls' schools. The joy it gave parents to see their little girls going to school was extraordinary. I did not understand it until I took my own daughter to school about a year ago. There was a lot of crying when she first went in—but I got over it—[Laughter]—and it went okay. I would love to see that continue, but there is a second image that I must leave the House with. It is a harder one, but I am afraid it is one that we must all remember.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con)

I wonder whether my hon. Friend could say a bit more about that second image.

Tom Tugendhat

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who was watching the clock more than me.

The second image is one that the forever war that has just reignited could lead to. It is the image of a man whose name I never knew, carrying a child who had died hours earlier into our firebase and begging for help. There was nothing we could do. It was over. That is what defeat looks like; it is when you no longer have the choice of how to help. This does not need to be defeat, but at the moment it damn well feels like it. [Applause.]

Mr Speaker

Order. Please, this is a very serious debate, and that was a very emotive and very important speech. We must recognise that we have to get through.

11:31:00

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)

It is a genuine honour to follow the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). I thank him, on behalf of the whole House and the whole country, not just for his powerful speech today but for his service and the service of men and

women in our armed forces who showed his courage in Afghanistan. I agree with him wholeheartedly that if we are going to look forward, we need to work with our international partners in Europe and across the world. We need to forge new relationships and not be over-dependent on one ally, however important and powerful that ally is. The failure to do that—indeed, the backward steps that this Government have taken in that regard in recent years—is one of the reasons our nation is weaker today, and it has been for far too long.

We are deeply proud of our armed forces, our diplomats and our aid workers who have done so much in Afghanistan, so it has been heartbreaking in the last few days to listen to the families, particularly of the 457 British soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice, asking the question “What was it all for?” and to listen to veterans remembering their comrades. Captain James Kayll, who made two tours of duty in Afghanistan, said on Sunday:

“After years and years of incredibly hard work from remarkable armed services in the country, I don’t know how I could ever, ever look the parents of fallen soldiers in the eye and say that what they did was worth it.”

Will the Prime Minister look our injured veterans and the families of the fallen in the eye and tell them it was worth it, after his foreign policy catastrophe?

The American decision to withdraw was not just a mistake; it was an avoidable mistake, from President Trump’s flawed deal with the Taliban to President Biden’s decision to proceed—and to proceed in such a disastrous way.

The human impact on the lives of millions of Afghans, especially women and refugees, is the most obvious and alarming consequence, but the impact on global politics and on Britain’s national security will be so negative that I fear this mistake will affect the lives of millions around the world for years to come.

Coalition forces were in Afghanistan for the protection and security of American and British people just as much as for Afghans. For well over seven years, coalition forces have not been doing the vast bulk of the fighting; the Afghan army has. Like others, when I heard President Biden blame Afghans for not fighting for their country, I could not believe it. He showed no awareness that more than 69,000 members of the Afghan forces have been killed.

I cannot hold President Biden to account in this House, but I can hold our own Government to account. Our Prime Minister and his Cabinet cannot escape their

culpability for this disaster—for both the mistaken decision to withdraw, and how the withdrawal has turned into such a catastrophe. From the Prime Minister’s self-evident lack of influence and clout in Washington, to his negligent inability, yet again, to master his brief and plan properly for the withdrawal, today’s occupant of No. 10 has become a national liability.

If the Prime Minister wants to dispel that growing view of him, let him answer the following questions. What role did the British Government play in the negotiations with the Taliban that led to President Trump’s flawed deal with them? Did the Prime Minister raise any concerns with President Biden about the wisdom of withdrawal from Afghanistan? If he did, what impact did he have in changing anything about President Biden’s policy? Either the Prime Minister has a close relationship with the US but failed to exploit it, or he has no close relationship and nothing to put in its place. Frankly, his foreign policy is a total disaster.

On Britain’s withdrawal planning, will the Prime Minister explain why he so misjudged the situation in Afghanistan that he told the House back on 8 July:

“I do not think that the Taliban are capable of victory by military means”—
[Official Report, 8 July 2021; Vol. 698, c. 1112.]

The Prime Minister appears to have had no understanding of the security and defence situation in Afghanistan as recently as last month. Despite being warned in this House and elsewhere that the Taliban would move rapidly on Kabul, his failures, along with President Biden’s, have led directly to the crisis that is unfolding before our eyes.

Afghans who have risked everything to help our soldiers and aid workers are now desperate for our help to escape. Refugees are fleeing in fear of their lives. Women and girls are seeing their futures stolen. Last night’s announcement that the Government are willing to take only 5,000 refugees in the next year utterly fails to respond to this crisis or to meet our obligations to so many Afghans.

Finally, there is the frightening failure to achieve the aim of the whole mission: to keep British people safe from international terrorists trained in Taliban Afghanistan. Where is the worked-through strategy, internationally agreed, to prevent Afghanistan from returning to the vector of terrorism that it once was? There isn’t one. Despite the Government’s having 18 months to prepare, they have not prepared a counter-terrorism strategy with our allies. I guess that that is

why this Prime Minister will not ever be able to look the families of the fallen in the eye.

11:38:00

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con)

I do not often mention my brother Jonathan, who was killed by an al-Qaeda affiliate in Bali in 2002. That prompted my personal interest in Afghanistan, a distant country that I visited a dozen times over the past two decades to better understand what we were doing to help to rebuild that troubled country. I pay tribute to our armed forces for what they did, and to what the Secretary of State for Defence and the armed forces are doing today in the evacuation.

It is with utter disbelief that I see us make such an operational and strategic blunder by retreating at this time. The decision is already triggering a humanitarian disaster, a migrant crisis not seen since the second world war and a cultural change in the rights of women, and it is once again turning Afghanistan into a breeding ground for terrorism. I am sorry that there will be no vote today because I believe the Government would not have the support of the House.

The Prime Minister is not in the Chamber, but he says that the future of Afghanistan is not written. Well, its future is very much more unpredictable because of our actions. I do not believe for a second that there will be a peaceful transition to the Taliban. They are not universally liked in the country. The Uzbek and Tajik warlords are regrouping as we speak. The Northern Alliance will reform once again and a bloody, terrible civil war will unfold.

John Redwood

Does my right hon. Friend have any advice for the Government on how they could take action to try to prevent the recurrence of a terrorist threat under Taliban control?

Mr Ellwood

My fear is that there will be an attack on the lines of 9/11 to bookend what happened 20 years ago, to show the futility of 20 years. We should never have left—I will come to that in a second—because after 20 years of effort, this is a humiliating strategic defeat for the west. The Taliban control more territory today than they did before 9/11.

I was born in the United States; I am a proud dual national and passionate about the transatlantic security alliance. Prior to him declaring his candidacy, I worked directly with President Biden on veterans' mental health issues. He was the keynote speaker at a veterans reception here in the House of Commons, as my guest, so it gives me no joy to criticise the President and say that the decision to withdraw, which he inherited, but then chose to endorse, was absolutely the wrong call. Yes, two decades is a long time. It has been a testing chapter for Afghanistan, so the US election promise to return troops was obviously a popular one, but it was a false narrative.

First, the notion that we gave the Afghans every opportunity over 20 years to progress, and that the country cannot be helped forever so it is time to come home, glosses over the hurdles—the own goals—that we created after the invasion. We denied the Taliban a seat at the table back in 2001. They asked to attend the Bonn talks but Donald Rumsfeld said no, so they crossed the Pakistan border to rearm, regroup and retrain. How different the last few decades would have been had they been included. Secondly, we did not start training the Afghan forces until 2005, by which time the Taliban were already on the advance. Finally, we imposed a western model of governance, which was completely inappropriate for Afghanistan, with all the power in Kabul. That was completely wrong for a country where loyalty is on a tribal and local level. That is not to dismiss the mass corruption, cronyism and elitism that is rife across Afghanistan, but those schoolboy errors in stabilisation hampered progress and made our mission harder.

There is also the notion that we cannot fight a war forever. We have not been fighting for the last three years. The US and the UK have not lost a single soldier, but we had a minimalist force there—enough assistance to give the Afghan forces the ability to contain the Taliban and, by extension, give legitimacy to the Afghan Government. The US has more personnel based in its embassy here than it had troops in Afghanistan before retreating. Both the US and the UK have long-term commitments across the world, which we forget about. Japan, Germany and Korea have been mentioned. There is Djibouti, Niger, Jordan and Iraq, and ourselves in Cyprus and Kenya, for example, and the Falklands, too. It is the endurance that counts. Success is not rated on when we return troops home. Such presence offers assurance, represents commitment, bolsters regional stability, and assists with building and strengthening the armed forces. That is exactly what we were doing in Afghanistan.

Last year, the Taliban were finally at the negotiation table in Doha, but in a rush to get a result, Trump struck a deal with the Taliban—by the way, without the

inclusion of the Afghan Government—and committed to a timetable for drawdown. All the Taliban had to do was wait. The final question is about whether the UK can lead or participate in a coalition without the US. Where is our foreign policy determined—here or in Washington? Our Government should have more confidence in themselves.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab)

The right hon. Gentleman makes perfectly reasonable and justified criticisms of the way the American Government came to a decision to leave in such haste, but like a number of other right hon. and hon. Members, the implication of his speech is that we somehow could have had an independent Afghan policy without the Americans. Can he explain how?

Mr Ellwood

First, the Americans are not leaving Afghanistan. This is a complete myth. The CIA will remain there, as will special forces and the drone oversight. Why? Because they will be haunted by another terrorist attack. It is the political inclination and the leadership that is disappearing—because of an American president, or two American presidents—and we could have stepped forward and filled the vacuum, but we did not. We need to have more confidence as a Government in ourselves, as we did in the last century. I thought that this was in our DNA. We have the means, the hard power and the connections to lead. What we require is the backbone, the courage and the leadership to step forward, yet when our moment comes, such as now, we are found wanting. There are serious questions to ask about our place in the world, what global Britain really means and what our foreign policy is all about.

We must raise our game. Why? Step back. We seem to be in denial about where the world is going. As I have said in the House many times, threats are increasing. Democracy across the globe is under threat and authoritarianism is on the rise, yet here we are, complicit in allowing another dictatorship to form as we become more isolationist. What was the G7 summit all about? The western reset to tackle growing instability, not least given China, Russia and Iran. Take a look at a map. Where does Afghanistan sit? Right between all three. Strategically, it is a useful country to stay close to, but now we have abandoned it and the Afghan people as well. Shame on us.

I hope that the Government think long and hard about our place in a fast-changing world. Bigger challenges and threats loom over the horizon. We are woefully unprepared and uncommitted. We—the UK and the west—have so many lessons

to learn. I repeat my call for an independent inquiry. We must learn these lessons quickly. The west is today a little weaker in a world that is a little more dangerous because we gave up on Afghanistan.

11:46:00

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab)

First, I pay my respects to all those military personnel who lost their lives, all those who still have mental health trauma, all those who still suffer from life-long injuries, and all those diplomats, journalists and 69,000 Afghani soldiers who lost their lives during the last 20 years.

In 2001, we went into Afghanistan to say to the people that we would get rid of the military, medieval regime and bring them up to speed as regards what we believed their living standards, education and living systems and style should be. We promised all those women that they could move forward—that they could be judges, politicians and teachers—and that they could learn. We said they could do what we could do—they could do everything that they wanted to do. That was right, because they should be able to do that.

Now, will all those women, and all those judges who wanted to put the system right in Afghanistan, be able to do that? The Taliban are saying, “We will treat everyone fairly, but under Islamic jurisprudence.” Does anybody understand what Islamic jurisprudence is? It is applied by individuals—the people who are in charge in that place. It is applied by those who sit in judgment. Their jurisprudence can be different from that of anybody else in that area. We can say that we have been given these guarantees, but we need to look at what those guarantees will mean to those women and how they will be treated.

Over the past 12 years, we have taken no real action in Afghanistan. The Obama Government dithered over what they wanted to do. The Trump Government did not know what they were doing; they tried to do, and did, backdoor deals with the Taliban. The Biden Government have just come in and, without looking at what is happening on the ground, have taken a unilateral decision, throwing us and everybody else to the fire. They have decided to withdraw in a manner that no military person of any rank would perceive as fit for the arena in which they serve.

What did we do wrong during that period? As the right hon. Members for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) said, we did not understand government there—we did not understand how it worked. Kabul has

never been Afghanistan's only entity. The people who ran the Government we placed there were totally corrupt, with hardly any mandate, and there for themselves. As we have seen, the current President has run away, leaving all those brave women to stay and believe in what they believe in. That was the Government we supported. Had we looked at the regional possibilities, the regional government that was in place and what the regional warlords were playing at, we would have understood the force of the Taliban, their training and how many people had been gathering in their ranks. We did not do that, and that is why we are suffering the consequences.

President Biden has decided to pull out because he does not believe that there is now a direct threat to the US. I do not know where he has got that intelligence from, but let us see how that goes. He needs to understand that this is about not just terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan, but the economic war going on in the region. By vacating Afghanistan and not speaking to its neighbour Pakistan, he will now provide a clear corridor for China and Russia to come through. It is not about a 20-year war, but about the current situation, the economy and the area's geographical position. I hoped that he would understand that but, unfortunately, I do not think that he has managed to.

We need to ensure that we address the refugees fleeing into Pakistan. Hundreds of thousands of people are crossing the border, but the Prime Minister did not once mention what relationship he has with Pakistan, what work he is doing with it, what support he will give it, or how he will speak to it about what to do. If we do not support those refugees and we do not understand what is going on, they will be left to the people traffickers who want to exploit them. Children will lose their lives in the seas and God knows where else.

We need co-ordination. We know enough to move forward and not make mistakes that we have already made. We need to work this properly, look to the region, support the people at source and resolve these issues, not leave it all until the very end.

11:53:00

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con)

I want to make three broad points about what has gone on over the past week. I want to talk about this place's responsibility towards those who serve, and our Afghan friends and partners. I also want to speak, if I can, for veterans of the conflict to whom I have spoken over the past week.

When it comes to responsibility, I urge Ministers to be very careful about talking exclusively about the Americans. We are very clear, and it is well understood, that the US is, or was, the framework nation in Afghanistan, but people who join the military from council estates in Plymouth, Newcastle, Stoke or Birmingham do not serve the American flag; they serve the British flag. They are proud to do so, and they do it at the behest of Ministers in this place. It dishonours their service simply to say, “The Americans have left—we are leaving.”

We do not spend £40 billion a year on a tier 1 military for it to be unable to go out the door without the Americans, and the taxpayer does not expect that. I urge Ministers to take responsibility for the decisions that they make, particularly when talking with the families.

I wish to talk about our Afghan friends and partners. I am pleased with the announcement today on refugees; it is a good start. People can talk numbers; they can say that they want more or that they want fewer, but the reality is—this is basic maths—that we will not get out of Afghanistan all those whom we promised to get out. We can say that we want more, or that we want fewer, but that is the reality. The truth is as well that we have to be honest in this place. For many, many years, people have campaigned against this relocation scheme and the previous intimidation scheme and said that it was not good enough. Decisions made by Ministers in this House have made this situation harder, so, although I welcome this change today and our onward progression, let us not kid ourselves about what has happened in the past and let us treat with a little more respect those who, with no self-interest, campaign for these people.

Finally, I want to speak to veterans and for veterans. Over the past few days, it has become clear to me that we are dealing with new feelings—Help for Heroes put out something on this yesterday. We are not trained to lose and we are not trained to deal with the way that Ministers are choosing to be defeated by the Taliban. Was it all for nothing? Of course, it was not for nothing, and we must get away from that narrative. Whether we like this or not it is a fact that, for a period of time, Afghans—the average age in Afghanistan is 18 years old—will have experienced the freedom and privileges that we enjoy here, and no one will ever take that away from them, which is incredibly important. What are we here to do if it is not to be good, honourable people, to fight for the oppressed, to keep our families safe and to live to a higher calling? Our veterans did this over many years in some of the hardest conditions and against as dark an enemy as this nation has ever faced. We often look to our forefathers for inspiration. They emulated them.

They did them proud, not in scale but in the same amphitheatre, they can be forever proud of what they did when the nation called. I say to them, “You played your role, but you cannot control what is happening now—remember that. What folk like me saw you do—the courage, the sacrifice and the humanity—will never die and it has defined us as human beings. You did that and nobody will ever take that away. I will never forget you. Every day the sun comes up, I will make sure that this place and this country do not forget you and your sacrifice on the altar of this nation’s continuing freedom.”

The Government must now step up and support this group of bereaved families and veterans. We will see a bow wave of mental health challenges. We are not trained to cope with the feelings that we have now. I have done everything that I possibly could to support all the brilliant staff at the Ministry of Defence, the Office for Veterans’ Affairs, and the NHS, which works tirelessly supporting veterans up and down this country, but I must say to the House with a heavy heart that the Prime Minister has consistently failed to honour what he said that he would do when he was trying to become Prime Minister. He must not wriggle out of his commitments on this issue. He knows that the Office for Veterans’ Affairs is nothing like it was designed to be: the paltry £5 million funding was slashed after less than a year, there was a lack of staff, and there was not even an office from which to work. Even today, the brilliant staff at the Office for Veterans’ Affairs simply cannot cope with the scale of the demand. While his predecessors may get away with a certain degree of ignorance in this space, I am afraid that the Prime Minister has no excuse on this issue; it is a political choice. The ambivalence needs to end, and he needs to step up and listen to the charities and to the veterans, not to those whom he chooses to employ around him who do not believe veterans’ issues are worth the political capital required. The nation cares, and we will make this Government care. The scale of the challenge of dealing with this Afghan generation is only just beginning. I pay tribute to everybody who has spoken up in this debate, but particularly to those who do not have a vested interest in Afghanistan and can see the inherent injustice of what is happening now. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for recalling the House today.

11:59:00

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab)

It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), as it is the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) and the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). They all spoke with great eloquence.

Like many hon. Members, I am wracked with a profound sadness at the catastrophe that has unfolded in Afghanistan. Above all, it is an unspeakable tragedy for the people of that country, who, after generations of conflict, now live under a terrible cloud of fear and repression. Who could fail to be moved by the agonising scenes from Kabul airport just this week? How desperate must someone have to be to want to cling on to the side of a moving aircraft? These past 20 years have been a struggle for peace. We tried to break the cycle of war, and to give hope to women and girls. We tried to give the Afghans a different life—one of hope and opportunity—but the catastrophic failure of international political leadership and the brutality of the Taliban have snatched all of that away from them. The new Administration in Kabul should know that they will be judged not by their words, but by their actions. The world is watching.

I want to reflect on the service and sacrifice of our brave servicemen and women, who have showed outstanding professionalism and courage throughout. As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View said just a moment ago, recent developments have hit them hard, and they are grappling with the question of whether all the effort and sacrifice was really worth it. They are again grieving for fallen comrades who did not come home. Whatever the outcome in Afghanistan, those men and women, and their families, should be proud of their service, and we must be proud of them.

Many of us who served in Afghanistan have a deep bond of affection for the Afghan people, and I had the honour of serving alongside them in Helmand. We trained together, fought together and, in some cases, died together. They were our brothers in arms. I shudder to think where those men are now. Many will be dead, and I know others now consider themselves to be dead men walking. Where were we in their hour of need? We were nowhere. That is shameful, and it will have a very long-lasting impact on Britain's reputation right around the world.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)

The hon. Gentleman—a fellow litigant—is absolutely right in his description of the Afghan armed forces. Will he add that many of them are more heroic and better soldiers than they are given credit for around the world?

Dan Jarvis

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, as always, and I completely agree with the point he made. It was particularly distasteful and dishonouring of President

Biden to make reference to the lack of courage and commitment from those Afghan soldiers, who have served with such bravery and distinction.

We have to be pragmatic, and at this difficult point we must think about what our next move will be. We should understand that the character of our country is defined, for better or for worse, by moments such as this. We should also understand that we face a moral and humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions, and the response from the international community and the British Government needs to meet the magnitude of the moment. We must step up the statecraft and engage with international allies and alliances, and with regional partners. Although it is a particularly bitter pill to have to swallow, we must engage diplomatically with the new regime in Kabul. It is in our cold-headed national interest to do so, because right now our armed forces are deployed on an operation to recover UK nationals and other entitled personnel. It is in their interests that we engage to try to ensure the safe passage of those who want to leave.

We also know that many, many more will want to get out, and with our allies we need to work to establish safe routes to get them to safety. We must show compassion and genuine generosity to refugees, while accelerating and expanding the ARAP scheme to support those who supported us.

We also need to defend the hard-won progress of the past 20 years or so—girls in school and women in Parliament and the judiciary. We must ensure that Afghanistan does not slide back to where it was pre-9/11. Then, when the dust settles, we need to look at what went wrong and learn the lessons of this failure: why, despite all the effort, could we not build an Afghan state free of corruption, with the legitimacy and competence to balance the competing forces in that country, and what does that now mean for our foreign and defence policy in this country?

Regardless of all that, we must remain engaged; we must show leadership; we must use whatever influence we have to try to make things better. That is in our own national interest, it is in line with our values, and it is the right thing to do. We owe it to the people of Afghanistan and we owe it to ourselves.

12:05:00

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con)

It has been said that there are decades when nothing happens and weeks when decades pass. What we are seeing in Afghanistan this week is decades, and they will shape the rest of my lifetime and that of many in this Chamber. This was a wholly preventable tragedy, and I and many colleagues around me are so very, very angry.

Our Government called for NATO allies to help us build a new coalition in Afghanistan to prevent the Taliban recapturing it, and we were let down. Only Turkey was willing to stand alongside us because they know what a failed state looks like. They have seen the refugees they support; they have seen the terrorists on their doorstep; they have seen the conflict and the suffering. It is bitterly disappointing and there is much we must learn from this. The UK could not have saved all those lives on our own. Multilateral collective responsibility should mean something, but I believe that too often today, it does not.

I have spent the last few days listening to our veterans, many of whom live in Rutland and Melton. I say to them now: many of us in this place will never truly understand the scars you carry, and we will never understand all you encountered, but all of you left me with one request—get the people out. That is what I, along with so many of my colleagues in this place, have been fighting for over the last few days: the veterans, the interpreters who supported families, those who identified IEDs, the female journalists fighting for their lives who have already had mines blow up their stations, and those who negotiated for their fellow Afghans against the Taliban. I must thank the Defence Secretary because he has been constant in his support, every hour over the weekend, to help me to get those people out. I thank him for his time.

Getting people out must be our priority. I welcome the Prime Minister's G7-led multilateral refugee programme. We have to get non-combatant evacuations proceeding at pace, but we are operating only with the consent of the Taliban—most certainly at the airport—and that can be withdrawn at any time, so my primary concern is those safe routes to the airport. The air bridge must be operational at all times and we must negotiate departures, and not just from Kabul. Land convoys must be considered humanitarian corridors.

Once we get those people out, we must ensure that refugee families are welcome to our country so that they can build the lives they never asked for. The kindness

of the British people is great, and Melton Borough Council and Harborough District Council have both already stepped up to the plate and said that they would like to take as many refugees as they can. The MOD is working with me to identify MOD housing stock in Rutland and across the constituency of Rutland and Melton, but I call on the Government to consider creating an initiative that allows British nationals to open their homes, their spare bedrooms and their second homes to those Afghans, similar to the private sponsorship route that already exists, because the British people want to step up and help.

Beyond the immediate life-saving operations, there is much that we must talk about. First, the British Government and the international community must recognise that the withdrawal is emblematic of a changing American posture. The comments that we have seen over the last few days have rattled me to my core, and yes, we are not meant to speak ill of our friends and allies, but in this case, we have no alternative but to call out the comments against our Afghan allies.

Secondly, the views of European allies such as the UK may no longer hold the same sway in Washington under this presidency. That means that we must take greater responsibility for our defence around the world. Global Britain means that we must act autonomously, but through multilaterals on the world stage with other partners, and we must convince our NATO allies that we can all stand together without the Americans. Yes, they bring the kit; yes, they bring the money; yes, they bring the numbers, but this is something that we can and must do. We must shift from the model of being over-reliant on the US.

Thirdly, we must fix our broken international system because it is not saving lives. The UN has failed to enable a political solution. There is no meaningful method or tactics to prevent the worst excesses of the Taliban, and the system is being undermined by hostile money flooding fragile states. There are hostile states sitting on the human rights and women's councils of all the organisations of the multilateral world. It is the UK's duty to fix the international system, because we can do it. I have sat at the negotiating tables, and it is the UK that brings countries together behind the scenes and provides the bureaucracy and systems that allow coalitions to be effective. We must recognise our unique expertise and step up.

We must also look hard at our strategic goals in south Asia, because China is most certainly doing that. Its goals are securing influence against Pakistan, stripping minerals and creating an alternative, superior democratic track. Its plunder diplomacy is well under way, and it is already using the situation to threaten Taiwan. It is saying, "Look what the Americans will do. They will leave you." By

recognising the Taliban, China has taken the first step towards creating an alternative international mechanism. The gravitational shift is towards it, and we must stand strong against that.

I also urge caution about our posture towards the Taliban. I must confess that I see what is being laid before the international community as simply platitudes— little more than a tactic to allow the Taliban to consolidate its control, avoid sanctions, keep the aid money rolling in, root out all those on its hit list and avoid UN Security Council measures. Perhaps I am wrong, but Pashtunwali tells us that Taliban intent includes justice or revenge as one of the core tenets of its society and way of life. We must also adequately monitor al-Qaeda.

The human cost of this withdrawal is monumental, but the strategic consequences risk being so much greater if we do not learn the lessons of the past few decades. We must properly focus on atrocity prevention. The new conflict centre, which I fought for, must lead our way in deciding how we become more strategic. We cannot be everywhere in this world and we cannot rescue every mission, but we can work on two core principles. The first is to protect our nation, our people and our prosperity. We must be single-minded in our focus on that and incredibly strategic. The second is that we must live up to our promises so that we can look in the eye those to whom we and our veterans have made promises, and stand squarely behind them. We cannot go wrong if that guides our foreign policy.

Finally, I thank our armed forces, our border staff, our Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff and Sir Laurie Bristow for the heroic work they are doing to get people out. I have worked in a crisis centre and I know the hours they are working. We are grateful for all they are doing. They are putting their lives at risk for the duty and responsibilities of this House.

We speak today in a changed world. I have no doubt that we will open our hearts to the people of Afghanistan. Together, we in this House must mourn those who are left behind and those who will not make it. Our singular purpose must be atrocity prevention in the future. We must recognise where the threats to this country lie and ensure that we are single-minded in our focus on challenging them and protecting our people. We must ensure that, in a world that has become darker and more uncertain this week, at least we know the light that we will follow.

12:13:00

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab)

We in this House and our constituents have all seen the chaos and speed of the Taliban takeover. One of the questions that we have to address today and in the days to come is: how did it happen and what lessons are to be learned?

The points that I want to make this afternoon are about the people we, the British people, cannot let down. First, we cannot let down the British veterans who, over 20 years, fought in Afghanistan, particularly in Helmand—one of the most dangerous provinces to fight in. I can do no better than quote Jack Cummings, who has been quoted in recent days.

He is a former British soldier who lost both legs on 14 August 2010 while searching for improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan. They are a few simple sentences, but they are worth repeating. He said:

“Was it worth it, probably not. Did I lose my legs for nothing, looks like it. Did my mates die in vain. Yep.”

We as a House of Commons and as a Parliament should not and cannot let down Jack Cummings and those 457 British soldiers who died in Afghanistan. As a Parliament, we will have to continue this debate to understand the lessons to be learned from what is happening to Afghanistan at the present time.

The other people we cannot let down are the people of Afghanistan. We know how many of them have died. We know that even as we speak, there are women and girls in their homes, in hiding or running away who are frightened for their future, their prospects and their lives under this Taliban regime. In the political solution, the debate and the discussion with NATO allies we must have the future of those Afghan women and girls at the centre of everything we are talking about and trying to do.

In the past 20 years, it is not just that 457 British soldiers died—although that is tragic, which is why I mentioned it—it is that we gave those women and girls hope. We gave them hope of a better future and of the prospects that women and girls all over the world, including here in Britain, have. We cannot just sit back and have them see that hope snatched away. We cannot let down the people of Afghanistan and we cannot let down those women and girls.

Finally, we cannot let down the refugees who we know will be pouring out of Afghanistan. The debate on refugees in the British Parliament is sometimes a little complex and difficult, and sometimes people have more to say about the burden of refugees than about our moral responsibility to them, but, speaking as someone who was in this House 20 years ago when we voted on an Adjournment for this military intervention, we have an extraordinary moral responsibility to these refugees. We have a responsibility to towns and cities all over this country, including in Scotland, that may well need more support and finance from Government, but we cannot let down those refugees. Our political and moral responsibility is too great.

It has been tragic to see the chaos of the Taliban takeover, but, if we do the right thing by our veterans, the Afghan people and refugees, we can at least know as a country that we have followed on from the initiative we took 20 years ago to intervene in that region to bear down on terrorism and disorder. I did not vote for the intervention in Afghanistan 20 years ago; I am afraid it was foreseeable that it would end like this. However, it is not inevitable that we as a country and this as a Parliament will not do the right thing. I urge colleagues on both sides of the House to address the important issue being raised today, so that we can go forward in pride and confidence in our own understanding of our moral responsibilities.

12:19:00

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)

In his speech of self-justification after the collapse of Kabul, President Biden reduced a complex military issue to only two stark alternatives. It was a gross oversimplification for him to pose a devil's dilemma between either a massive troop surge on a never-ending basis or a ruthless, chaotic and dishonourable departure. It is ruthless because people who trusted NATO will pay a terrible price; chaotic because of a lack of foresight to plan an orderly and properly protected departure; and dishonourable because even if our open-ended, nation-building, micromanagement strategy was wrong, as I think it was, in 20 years we created expectations and obligations which those who relied on us had a right to expect us to fulfil, as the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) has just said.

It has been pointed out correctly that for 20 years, NATO operations in Afghanistan succeeded in preventing further al-Qaeda attacks on the west from being launched under Taliban protection. That was indeed the key outcome, but

unless we choose a better future strategy, the threat of its reversal is all too real. Not only may sanctuary on Afghan soil again be offered to lethal international terrorists, but other Islamist states may also decide to follow suit. How, then, should we have handled a country like Afghanistan when it served as a base and a launchpad for al-Qaeda, and how should we deal with such situations in the future?

These are my personal views on a defence issue unrelated to the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee. For the past 10 years, I have argued both inside and outside this Chamber, very often to the dismay of my parliamentary colleagues, that a form of containment rather than counter-insurgency is the only practical answer to international terrorist movements sheltered and sponsored by rogue regimes like the Taliban. Containment, as older colleagues will remember, was the policy that held the Soviet Union in check throughout the cold war until its empire imploded and its ideology was discredited. Islamist extremism has a subversive reach similar to that of revolutionary communism, and our task is to keep it at bay until it collapses completely or evolves into tolerant, or at least tolerable, alternative doctrines.

In Afghanistan, the task of overthrowing the Taliban and driving al-Qaeda into exile was quickly accomplished in 2001, and at that point NATO arrived at a fork in the road. The option selected was, as we know, an open-ended commitment to impose a western version of democracy and protect it indefinitely in a country that had a strong sense of its own political and social culture and which was known to be politically allergic to foreign intervention.

Yet there was another option available to western strategists in response to the 9/11 attacks. Having achieved our immediate objectives of putting al-Qaeda to flight and punishing the Taliban, we should have announced that we were completely removing our forces but would promptly return by land and air to repeat the process if international terrorist groups were again detected in Afghanistan. When the Taliban regain full territorial control, they will lose their shield of invisibility. If they then choose to pose or facilitate a renewed threat—a terrorist threat—to western security, they should expect both their leadership and their military capability to be hit hard by our mobile land and air forces. That cycle would be repeated until the threat was removed, but we should not and would not allow our forces to be sucked in again.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)

My right hon. Friend is making some very important points. Has the game not changed slightly, though, with the immediate recognition of the Taliban Government by China and Russia? As they are permanent members of the Security Council, it will be very difficult to get any UN-led action in the way he describes.

Dr Lewis

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right but, of course, this was a NATO intervention, and it is to NATO that we have to look when there are serious threats to international security, particularly those affecting western interests.

The point is that it has to be flexible, because al-Qaeda itself is very flexible. An active containment policy of this sort can track and match the flexibility of the terrorists. Such a policy depends on the maintenance of integrated and highly mobile land forces, positioned in regional strategic base and bridgehead areas.

Mr Mark Harper

My right hon. Friend is Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, and for this strategy to be successful it requires excellent intelligence with good analysis so that Ministers can make sound decisions. In this case, I fear that has not been the case. Does his Committee have any plans to investigate the intelligence failures in this case so that we can deliver the strategy he is so excellently setting out?

Dr Lewis

I am glad that my right hon. Friend approves of the strategy, but I said earlier that this speech on defence is, if anything, in my capacity as a former Chairman of the Defence Committee. I am not in a position at this stage to say anything publicly about what the ISC might or might not agree to do, but obviously his suggestion is pertinent.

The point about strategic base and bridgehead areas is that they contain integrated forces that are ready to strike and then withdraw, and then to strike again whenever and wherever needed—in Afghanistan or in any other susceptible state that becomes what our Defence Secretary and now our Prime Minister have rightly described as “breeding grounds” for al-Qaeda or similar international terrorist groups. Proportionate military initiatives could be taken, and interventions made, without undue logistical complexity and without getting sucked into full scale counter-insurgency campaigning while the terrorists redirect

their efforts to neighbouring countries, leaving us mired in the original countries from which they operated.

Active containment is the hard-headed solution to an otherwise intractable dilemma: whether to allow terrorists to attack us with impunity or whether to shoulder the unending burden of indefinitely occupying every reckless rogue state that shelters and supports them. It is okay for people to say, “This is over. There is no way we are going back into Afghanistan.” However, I do not want to be here, in the years or months to come, after another spectacular al-Qaeda type attack on a western country, with people looking around once again for a strategy because we are in a situation, as it seems we are, where the President of the United States can see only total withdrawal on one side or endless commitment on the other.

There is a flexible middle way, and it is an adaptation of the way in which we successfully saw off our cold war confrontation. It worked then, in a very different context, and it would work now in this context, too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

There are, obviously, a great many colleagues trying to catch my eye. After the next contribution, I will have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

12:29:00

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP)

Today, as we look on at the situation in Afghanistan, we think first and foremost of the plight of the people of that beleaguered country. It is my view that today is not a day for political point scoring. It is a day for this House to reflect on what we need to do, as a Parliament and a Government, to respond to this crisis. While people have made valid points in this debate, and while I respect that, I think that the people in Afghanistan—the desperate people at Kabul airport—do not want to hear our point scoring. They want to know what we are going to do to help them, and that is what we must turn our mind to.

I also want to pay tribute today, as have other right hon. and hon. Members, to our brave servicemen and women and others who have served our countries, in particular those who have sacrificed their lives in Afghanistan. I want to recall in particular the nine service personnel from Northern Ireland who gave their lives in Afghanistan during operations there. I am going to name those individuals, because I think it is worthy that we remember who these people and their families

are at this time: Channing Day, a young woman from Comber in County Down who was killed in action; David Dalzell, 20 years old, from Bangor in County Down; Aaron McCormick, 22 years old, from Macosquin in County Londonderry; Stephen McKee, 27 years old, from Banbridge in County Down; Nigel Moffett, 29 years old, from Belfast; David Patton, 38, from Aghadowey in County Antrim; Neal Turkington, 26, from Craigavon in County Armagh; and in my own constituency, Stephen Walker, from Lisburn, 42 years old, and Captain Mark Hale, 42 years old, from Dromara in County Down.

Almost all the counties in Northern Ireland—indeed, probably all of them—are represented by that roll call. We are very proud of our armed forces and the fact that during the campaign in Afghanistan more reserve forces were deployed from our region than from any other part of the United Kingdom. The willingness of our men and women to give up their time to volunteer to serve in our armed forces needs also to be recognised, and we support them. I certainly do not adhere to the view that their sacrifice was in vain. We applaud what they have done, even though now we look upon political failure in Afghanistan.

We need to learn the lessons from that. We need to understand what has gone wrong, but first and foremost we must look to the humanitarian assistance that is now urgently required, especially for those men and women who supported our armed forces in Afghanistan. I, like many in this House, have been contacted by veterans who know interpreters and civilian staff who worked in Camp Bastion and other military bases occupied by the British armed forces. They are desperate to know what we are going to do to help those men and women, who now face—well, goodness knows what plight they may suffer at the hands of the Taliban. We need to step up now. As they stepped up for us during the war in Afghanistan, we now must step up for them and offer sanctuary to these courageous people and their families.

We need also to consider the plight of religious minorities, to which my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) referred earlier, including Christians, who now face massive persecution in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is ranked second only to North Korea in terms of religious persecution against Christians and others. We must not lose sight of that in the midst of all this.

Then of course there is the threat of international terrorism—the reason why we entered Afghanistan in the first place. The Prime Minister is right: we must now take all reasonable steps to ensure that Afghanistan does not once again become a location for the training of extremist terrorists—a base from which to launch

attacks on the western world. We must ensure that our intelligence capacity is enhanced. I look on with trepidation when I consider some of the intelligence failures that we have witnessed in recent times. We must do more to resource our intelligence services to ensure that we know and understand what is happening in Afghanistan, particularly in relation to the Taliban and their links to extremist Islam, and the potential for international terrorism now having a safe haven from which to operate.

My final point is on overseas aid. I am not going to point score, but I simply make say that we cannot seriously at this time contemplate cutting our international aid budget when people are in absolute desperation. It is a mark of this country that it is strong in its humanity and its desire to help others, and we must do that now. Stepping up to the mark does not mean just in military terms. It does not mean just in defence or political terms; it means with our heart as well. We must reach out to those in need and ensure that they have the support and resources they require. Yes, there will be time to look at what went wrong, and a time perhaps for political recrimination. But now is the time for this country to stand tall, step up, and do what is necessary to help the people in Afghanistan, especially those who helped us during the war.

12:36:00

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)

The visions on television sets the other day very much were redolent of 1975. No matter what Secretary of State Blinken said, the parallels with the Americans' departure from Saigon were shocking, but also very true. My point is that the way we withdraw matters almost as much as the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan—I will return to that in a moment. The chaotic, ghastly departure, the way that people were falling off aircraft in their determination to get away, and the helicopters shipping people out, say terrible things about the values that we hold and those we wish to protect. This is a shame on all of us, not just America, but also the whole of NATO and here for us in this House.

We know that US support for the military in Afghanistan had evaporated and there was pressure to leave, but there was a better way. The US non-partisan Afghanistan study group came forward and said that over the past 18 months the US had suffered no casualties at all. It had withdrawn directly from the frontline, and the same for the UK. We were giving support, help and aid to those on the frontline, including the 70,000 members of the Afghan forces who died and of whom we should be incredibly proud today.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)

The Prime Minister reminded the House that the Afghans lost 70,000 men whom we helped to train and whom we fought alongside, even though some of them were not paid for many months because of endemic corruption in Kabul. Does my right hon. Friend agree that to imply, as some have, that they basically ran away, when for 10 years and more they had done precisely the opposite, is shameful?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith

There is no question but that is an infamous statement to make. Those men and women lost their lives trying to uphold what we had brought to Afghanistan, and we should be proud of them. I say to the American President—the Government and even the Opposition leadership are perhaps reluctant to say this—that he has no right to use excuses and base them on people who have lost their lives, and done so bravely. The withdrawal of air support was critical at that moment. The moment that went, the Taliban got a green light and knew they were going to go in and that the Afghan forces could not be supported. That was a critical decision. It was done in a hurry, and it was wrong.

As I said earlier, the Afghanistan study group said that there was no need for this precipitative departure by America. It could have kept a number of forces there at a much lower cost, supporting those on the frontline, and we could have supported it in doing that. I ask my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, did we at any stage demand that the US Government review their decision? Did we say to them that this was wrong, or that we must find a way to support what we have started in Afghanistan? I am proud of what our troops achieved and I know they will feel deserted at this point. I did not serve in Afghanistan, but I served in Northern Ireland and I know what the feeling is. However, I say that today those who died rise in glory because they gave something to the Afghans—hope. We must find a way of ensuring that it is not dashed.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con)

On the point about hope, I think of the 45-year-old woman in Kabul on Sunday who spent 20 years being oppressed and having access to education reduced, then spent 20 years with good fortune, raising a family with women and girls, and now faces all that being taken away. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to offer her hope as well?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith

We do. The problem is that we and the Americans have pulled out. We now have to find a way to support people. Those who need to come here must come, the doors must be open and we must do what we have to do.

The west, upholding democracy, the rule of law and human rights, is in retreat. We have now opened the door to the Chinese and the Russians, who by the way kept their embassies open, fully staffed, throughout the whole of this, with permission from the Taliban. The Chinese have recognised the Taliban and we see the Chinese Foreign Minister meeting them. What are we dealing with here? Let me read what the Global Times, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Government, said yesterday about Taiwan:

“From what happened in Afghanistan, those in Taiwan should perceive that once a war breaks out in the Straits, the island’s defense will collapse in hours and US military won’t come to help.”

That will have gone out according to President Xi’s directive. The Chinese know what they are dealing with. They now believe that we will not stand up for freedom and democracy. We have encouraged totalitarian and terrible, oppressive states to believe that we are in full retreat.

After Saigon, America left the global stage for a decade and there were terrible consequences, including in Iran. We cannot allow that to happen again. I criticised America for what has happened, but I also know that they are our greatest and best allies, and the best hope of freedom. We need to bring them back. The British Government’s job is to bring the Americans back to realise their commitment. All those years ago, John Kennedy said:

“Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

That should enshrine our purpose.

Democracy and human rights are delicate flowers. They are not the natural state of being unless they are defended, and we must defend them wherever they are. Yes, there are costs and there is a better way in Afghanistan, but in the chaotic rush and despicable retreat from Kabul, we have heartened and emboldened those who would bring democracy down.

When pressed about the matter, President Reagan said:

“Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction ... It has to be fought for.”

I hope the US listens to that quote. We in this House take liberties for granted. We must speak out. America must come back and we must send a signal immediately that we will not give way, that the totalitarian states of China and Russia cannot win in the end and that Islamic extremism cannot find a bolthole. Yes, we want to say that the Taliban must step up, but what will we do about it? We must put means behind words. The House must make that happen.

12:43:00

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)

We have heard many sobering words in this debate already. I pay particular tribute to the words from our colleagues who have themselves served in Afghanistan, to all their colleagues over many years and to all those in our armed forces, particularly those who have lost their lives, including two brave soldiers from Castleford, Rifleman James Backhouse and Bombardier Craig Hopson. I also pay tribute to those who have worked in our aid agencies and for partner organisations to support development and education projects and to try to rebuild a future for Afghanistan, and to all those who have rightly worked so hard and made it possible for families to live in some semblance of security and for girls—children—to be able to go to school for many years.

That is what makes it so disturbing, shameful and distressing to watch the events in Afghanistan right now: people who worked with us and helped us now hiding, their lives at risk; women and girls forced to hide in their homes simply because they are women and girls; hard-line extremists and terrorists back in charge, creating a security risk across the globe; and no evident strategy from the US, the UK and our allies, but what instead looks like just a chaotic retreat. We have a responsibility to respond, so I want to focus particularly on some of the practical things that should and can be done now to address the humanitarian crisis that we face.

First, I turn to those who have put their lives at risk by working with us. I welcome the Afghan relocation and assistance policy, but it is too narrow. It refers to directly employed staff. For the last 20 years, much of the work of the UK

Government, including aid work and nation rebuilding work, has been through contracts with UK agencies and organisations. The Taliban do not recognise the complexities of a contracting-out process, so many of those lives are also at risk.

Some organisations have been in touch with their staff and former employees. One has told me that a woman who worked on the UK aid programme for three years and is now in hiding in Kabul has said this weekend:

“Only 3 weeks ago one of my neighbours told me that when they come he would tell them who I am and who my family is. A couple of days ago, a strange man told me in the streets, ‘I know where you work and who you are.’ I fear seeing my kids tortured in front of my eyes or having my skin peeled off while I am alive. We remain locked inside, fearful of even looking out of the window—every time the door knocks fear goes through my whole body and I fear they are coming for me.”

Another, who provided secure accommodation for UK embassy staff and British aid workers, has said:

“Taliban fighters arrived at my father’s home this week asking for me by name. I just left my home city three days before and my father told the Taliban I had gone abroad for medical treatment. The fighters still forced their way into the house and searched every room.”

We have obligations to these people.

Emma Hardy (Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)

I am sure that my right hon. Friend, along with many other Members across the House, have been contacted by people desperately worried about loved ones in Afghanistan. One of my constituents has contacted me, saying that his pregnant wife is in Afghanistan now. The Taliban have taken out the communication signals, so he is unable to contact her. He did not put in an application for her to come to this country because of the English language requirement on the application form. Surely now is the time to relax that rule temporarily to allow these people to come to our country.

Yvette Cooper

My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. This is the kind of flexibility that the UK Government could adopt right now. We need such measures for those who have families at risk, but we also need urgently to review and broaden the scope of the

relocation scheme. The Home Secretary said in interviews this morning that those who have worked for NGOs that delivered UK aid programmes would also be included. I say to the Foreign Secretary that that is not happening on the ground right now; it is not reflected in the guidance that the Government are operating at the moment or in the application process, and people are being turned down as we speak. People have been turned down this weekend, even though they are at risk and have worked on UK-funded programmes. I urge the Government urgently to look at the relocation scheme. People cannot wait for the resettlement scheme to be in place.

Let me say something about that too. I welcome the Government's commitment to a resettlement scheme. The Prime Minister confirmed to me earlier that the pledge to help 5,000 people this year is in addition to the commitment made in 2019 to resettle 5,000 people a year from across the world, not instead of it. That existing resettlement scheme is not fully reinstated after covid and it urgently needs to be, but the fact that that infrastructure, those systems and that funding is in place should make it possible for us very urgently to put in place an Afghan relocation scheme, and to accelerate and be more ambitious than the announcement that the Home Secretary made this morning. Again, I urge the Government to work urgently with the agencies on the ground, which can identify straightaway the people who are at most at risk, and to recognise the position of those who are currently here, whose applications for asylum may have been turned down before circumstances escalated. Please can those cases be urgently reviewed rather than refused on out-of-date grounds? Finally, I urge the Government to do more to support refugees in the region, because we know more people will flee.

We have a responsibility not to turn our backs. The situation may be bleak and the circumstances difficult, but we have a duty not to disengage.

12:50:00

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con)

Above my desk in my constituency office there is a picture of Sir Winston Churchill, under which are the words:

“We are all of us defending ... a cause ... the cause of freedom and of justice, of the weak against the strong, of law against violence, of mercy and tolerance against brutality and ironbound tyranny.”

Sir Winston Churchill was speaking in 1942, but in many ways his words speak of Afghanistan throughout the centuries, and certainly in the 21st century.

When we think of Afghanistan, we think of our heroes—of the soldiers who went to serve and who did not return, or who were injured, their lives changed forever. We think of heroes such as Flight Lieutenant Alan Scott, a former Loughborough University student, or Guardsman Jack Davies of Loughborough, who was only 23 at the time of his death. We think of the Royal Anglian Regiment, whose members were awarded the freedom to enter the borough of Charnwood in 2006, in recognition of their service to our country and our town.

Sadly, I remember 9/11 very well and can understand the need at the time to, as the President of the USA said, “degrade the terrorist threat” and to keep Afghanistan from becoming a base from which attacks against the United States could continue. Given that no more terrorist attacks on that scale have been launched from Afghanistan in the last 20 years, it is clear that the intervention achieved its aims. However, the President also justified the fast-paced withdrawal of military personnel by claiming that the USA

“did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build.”

Despite that being the case, the USA, with the support of NATO and the UK, has moved the nation forward. That is demonstrated by the fact that today millions of girls in Afghanistan go to school and women hold more than a quarter of the seats in Afghanistan’s parliament, in stark contrast with the situation under the previous Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in which no girls attended school and women were excluded from governance. We absolutely must not sit back and allow that progress to be undermined.

I do not advocate the imposition of our western society on any other society—countries should of course be free to do as their people wish—but I do advocate democracy and the people of every country being afforded their basic human rights, including free will and the choice to determine how they live and the environment in which their children grow up. As such, the UK Government continue to play a role as we transition to a new phase of international support for Afghanistan. We must be clear with the Taliban that if they continue to abuse domestic human rights, they cannot expect to enjoy any legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people or the international community. A small number of my constituents have relatives in Afghanistan, and I would like their applications for

refugee status, or discretionary right to remain in the case of spouses, to be dealt with swiftly and positively.

For 20 years, the work of our armed forces has protected the Afghan people and denied terrorists a safe haven from which to launch attacks against the UK. Those same forces have enabled development to take place that has improved the lives of millions and transformed Afghan society. I thank our armed forces for their huge sacrifice and the contribution that each has made, and I ask that those who helped our armed forces to deliver that help and support in Afghanistan also be helped and supported here in the UK.

12:54:00

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP)

Four hundred and fifty-seven UK service personnel, in excess of 3,000 coalition forces, nearly 70,000 Afghan Government troops and police, aid workers, journalists, humanitarians and tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have been killed over the past two decades. Many, many thousands more have been injured or brutalised. I hope—it is only hope—that all that pain and suffering was not in vain, but I fear greatly when I see the current scenes at Kabul airport.

Before I start properly, I wish to make an observation. The right hon. Members for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) both mentioned intelligence. I do not know whether there was a failure of intelligence or of intelligence assessment, whether those who had the facts had the access or the confidence to speak truth to power, or whether the Ministers who were in receipt of those assessments understood them or ignored them, but when the autopsy on this situation is complete, we need to know whether there was in any way an intelligence failure.

Let me put the Afghan situation into a slightly broader regional context. On 2 August 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. On 16 January 1991, 700,000 troops, including from the UK, launched Operation Desert Storm and Operation Desert Sabre and destroyed Iraq's air defences, communications, Government buildings, weapons plants, oil refineries, bridges and roads. Iraqi resistance collapsed on 28 February, but Saddam Hussein was left in power, and uprisings by the Kurds and the Shi'ites in the south were brutally suppressed.

On 20 March 2003, the Iraq war started when allied forces, including UK forces, launched an attack on Iraq. Although the fighting was mainly over by 1 May, it

would be six more years until UK combat operations came to an end. The war would cost at least \$1 trillion dollars—some say between \$3 trillion and \$6 trillion—and perhaps a million people would lose their lives. It would see the rise of ISIL—Islamic State—which at one point would control a third of the territory of Iraq. By the time that conflict was ending, Libya had a revolution, or a civil war or, more accurately, a NATO-backed insurrection. A second civil war followed and there were at least 10,000 dead people and two competing Governments. Of course, I could add that the UK and others are supporting rebel forces in the ongoing tragedy that is Syria.

Within a decade of the start of the first Gulf war, we had 9/11. There were four planes: one went into the north tower of the World Trade Centre and one into the south tower; one went into the Pentagon; and one went into a field in southern Pennsylvania. In the World Trade Centre, 2,600 died; 125 died in the Pentagon; and 256 died on the planes. The US death toll was bigger than that at Pearl Harbour.

On 7 October 2001, the bombing of al-Qaeda and Taliban positions by US and UK forces started, with conventional ground forces going in 12 days later. That action was completely justified. By November 2001, the Taliban were in retreat. By 5 December there was an interim Government and by 9 December the Taliban had collapsed. One would have thought we were coming towards the endgame.

It took more than another 10 years for combat missions to stop. We then did not heed the warnings as province after province fell and the Taliban began to control more and more territory. We did not heed the warnings in 2018, when 115 died in suicide attacks in Kabul. We should have heeded the warnings and seen what was going to come next and the rapid way in which the Taliban took over almost the whole of Afghanistan.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP)

Is that not why it is so important that the UK Government maintain and increase their aid commitment? No matter what the Foreign Secretary says about doubling aid, the reality is that less aid money will go into Afghanistan this year than was previously planned—a direct result of the unfortunate decision to cut aid from 0.7% to 0.5%.

Stewart Hosie

I agree entirely with my hon. Friend that the aid budgets must at the very least be maintained at their previous level, and probably increased. I also agree with all

the calls today that it is not simply UK citizens and those who work directly for us who are at risk; it is many, many of us whose lives are at risk from the Taliban, and we, the west, must do everything that we can to evacuate all—all—of those who put their faith and trust in us and whose lives are now in jeopardy.

I have a question, which I know many members of the public have. Why is there always the political will and the funding to go to war, but rarely the foresight to work out what the consequences for ordinary people will be, although those consequences are always the same; and why are there never the resources to rebuild and reconstruct, and never a plan to win the peace?

13:00:00

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)

We have all in Parliament been horrified by recent developments, from the harrowing scenes at Kabul airport to the reports of retribution from the Taliban, the shambles of an exit strategy and the failure of the international community at this critical point. It is self-evident that our mistaken intervention now brings its responsibilities, and whatever the strategic long-term lessons, the first priority now must be to save lives. So I welcome what the Government are doing to get our nationals out, but I urge them, as many hon. Members have done today, to be generous in our welcome of the many refugees who are fleeing in fear of their lives.

I do worry about arbitrary figures—an extra 5,000—at this point, because we simply do not know the scale of the humanitarian disaster. I urge the Government to keep an open mind on that. We have to be generous. If other nations will not do their fair share, we have to go beyond our fair share in ensuring that we live up to those obligations and responsibilities. That is a product of our 20-year intervention.

I would also urge the Foreign Secretary, please, to do what he can to help all those who have assisted the UK in Afghanistan—not just the military. As he knows, I chair the all-party group on the British Council, and we are particularly concerned about the slow progress of the ARAP scheme, which seems to be creating a backlog. There is a narrow window of opportunity here and I urge the Foreign Secretary to reinforce what the Prime Minister assured me from the Dispatch Box today, that sufficient resources are committed to ensure that no one is left behind who wishes to leave.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP)

Of course, we are grateful to the Government for making the commitment to welcoming new refugees to the UK, but does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that, alongside the UNHCR definition of what is required to be a refugee, the UK Government have introduced additional requirements, which will make the process far more complex and make it far more difficult to prove that these refugees are genuine?

Mr Baron

I can assure the hon. Member that many, if not all, on the Government side, and no doubt on both sides, of the House will press the Government as best they can to ensure that our welcome of refugees is nothing short of very generous, given the circumstances of the case. We owe it to those people; we need to stand by them. Of course, the usual terrorist screening and so on must take place, but I have got the message across, I have had a response from the Prime Minister, I know that the Foreign Secretary is a man of his word and I, as chair of the all-party group, have made this representation very strongly in the House today and fully expect that the Government will honour it. There are too many people trapped, at the moment, in the bureaucratic mess in Kabul airport, despite the wonderful work that our ambassador is doing there—in the airport—and we need to commit sufficient resources. I think I have made that point strongly enough, and if the hon. Lady does not mind, I shall quickly move on and make a couple of other points.

I would argue that this has proved to be yet another mistaken intervention, which will sit alongside Iraq, Libya and Syria. The fundamental error that we made here—it has been alluded to in one or two very good speeches—is that we allowed the initial, limited and very successful mission of expelling al-Qaeda in 2001 to morph into a much wider intervention of nation building, which meant fighting the Taliban. That was unnecessary, given that the 2001 intervention had proved that we could achieve our goals of combating terrorism through limited interventions.

As one of the few Conservative MPs at the time to oppose the wider intervention and to vote against it, I suggest that the mission was born of ignorance, was over-ambitious and, from the very start, was thoroughly under-resourced. If we are not prepared to put in the resource to see this through to the end, we should not be surprised at the sort of exit shambles that we have recently seen. The policy was defended by too many—for too long—who should have known better, whatever their purposes, including a few in this place. I pay honour to our service personnel. They did their job in buying time—it is up to the politicians to come up with the

solutions—and they achieved their missions. They can be proud, and we can be proud of them.

While the priority now is to save lives, the scale of the error is such that, I believe, the many bereaved families and service personnel who are still paying the price of this intervention, including eight fusiliers from my regiment, the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, and the 30 or so wounded from the regiment who are living with life-changing injuries, deserve an apology from the Prime Minister on behalf of previous Governments, even though the exit strategy was not of No. 10's making. I think that that is the very least we can do. They can be proud, we can be proud of them, but I think that an apology is certainly due.

13:07:00

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab)

I was elected to the House in 2001, which was the year of the NATO intervention in Afghanistan. I recall very clearly that the objective clearly stated by the then Government was to stop Afghanistan being a safe haven for terrorists. In the short term, we were successful in that objective, but it was clear early on that there was a crying need to work with the Afghan people to change the nature of the country, to create a democratic system in which women had equality and real opportunities, and where the rule of law held firm. Only then would the country never again be a safe haven for terrorists. That was the argument that was clearly made and which was accepted in the House.

I wish to pay tribute to the armed forces, some from my constituency, many of whom lost their life or suffered life-changing injuries. In particular, I refer to Sergeant-Major Michael Williams of my home village of Bedwas, who lost his life in combat with the Taliban. We are proud of them all. There is, I believe, a widespread consensus emerging in the House that it was a huge mistake to leave Afghanistan in the way we did and in the time we did. The question now is what did our Prime Minister say to President Biden to try to dissuade him from this catastrophic course? The House deserves a clear answer to that fundamental question.

Today, the danger is that Afghanistan may once again become a safe haven for international terrorists we have seen in action in the past. Let us not forget that one of the first actions of the Taliban was to release thousands of prisoners, many of whom were terrorists. Once a terrorist, it is quite possible that someone will be a terrorist again. The Taliban leaders say they have changed their colours, but I

have to say that is unlikely. Certainly, their public relations have improved, but I doubt fundamentally whether they have changed. I say that because already we can see widespread atrocities in Afghanistan outside Kabul, we can see thousands of Afghans who understand what the Taliban are all about desperate to leave their country, and we must recognise that the Taliban are a diverse group; many of them outside Kabul are very different from the PR-slick Taliban leaders we see on our television screens.

Of course, we are most concerned about the situation at Kabul airport. British citizens need to be brought out as quickly as possible, and I pay tribute to the soldiers who are helping to facilitate that and to our British ambassador. We also need to bring out as quickly as possible those who have worked with us; we need desperately to stand by them. We must recognise that the Afghans who are vulnerable must be given support and sanctuary in our own country and many others. Indeed, we must be generous in our support. That is our responsibility as a nation.

In addition, we must be prepared for the refugee crisis that is, unfortunately, likely to emerge. That crisis will be global in character, but it will particularly affect the nation states around Afghanistan—Iran and Pakistan in particular—and we must re-examine the cuts to our aid budget to give maximum support. In essence, it is vital that this House collectively sends a message to the people of Afghanistan and, indeed, to the world that we will stand by the people of Afghanistan in this, their hour of need.

13:11:00

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)

It is a privilege to follow so many distinguished hon. Members who themselves fought on the frontline in Afghanistan.

President Biden said this week that his

“only vital national interest in Afghanistan”

was to prevent a terrorist attack. Even if that is the case, both he and President Trump should be deeply ashamed—I say this with great sadness—because their actions have returned Afghanistan to the very Government that harboured the 9/11 bombers.

The truth is that 457 British servicemen and women did not lose their lives simply to reduce the terrorist threat, although they succeeded in that with great distinction. They paid their price in defence of a set of values—values that said that girls should be entitled to the same education as boys, that courts should be independent of clerics, that journalists should not be imprisoned if they speak truth to power. If President Biden believes in those values, it is time the world heard it—and it is time we heard the same from the British Government, too.

Although it is not possible to stay in Afghanistan without US support, we are the second power in a western alliance. For all the failures of this week, and not just in Afghanistan, but in Iraq and even Vietnam, that western alliance has delivered more freedom, more prosperity, more respect for human rights across the globe than at any time in human history. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) just said, those gains are now at risk, not just because of what happened this week but because of the rise of an authoritarian and wealthy China that actively opposes the open societies we believe in.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)

As a former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend is right to scrutinise our American allies, but will he acknowledge that the lack of support, commensurate to their sizes, from European NATO partners has also led to the situation we are facing today?

Jeremy Hunt

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that. It is not sustainable to ask America to spend 4% of its GDP on defence when the entirety of Europe spends no more than just over 2%.

The threat we face is a threat that all of us face.

For 15 consecutive years, the number of free countries in the world has been in decline. Since 2013, according to Reporters Without Borders, press freedom has been in decline. This decade, for the first time in any of our lifetimes, the largest economy in the world will not be a democracy, when China overtakes the United States.

We are proud of our country not just because of what we have achieved and not just because of our wealth, but because of what we stand for. When those values are under threat, and when the Atlantic partnership appears to be fraying, we

should be stopping at nothing to rebuild them. That means investing in our armed forces, reversing the aid cut, developing our own technology and rebuilding our global alliances. There is something we can do right now: cut through bureaucracy and ensure that we look after every single Afghani who took risks for themselves and their families because they believed in a better future and trusted us to deliver it.

John Howell (Henley) (Con)

Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Hunt

I am just coming to my conclusion.

We cannot reverse what happened this week, but we can limit the damage and learn from what went wrong. That means not just grieving silently at the actions of a close ally, but recognising the threats we face and roaring defiantly in defence of the values we share.

13:16:00

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)

Watching the scenes at Kabul airport this week left me and many others with feelings of overwhelming grief and anger: grief for the millions of Afghan women and girls in particular who were promised a brighter future and the opportunity to learn, work and pursue their dreams; and anger that the many pledges made to the Afghan people over the past 20 years have been broken as they were abandoned to their fate.

The stories being told by terrified Afghans are heart-rending. There are the women students who are now hiding their diplomas and certificates for fear of punishment, and in the belief that in any case their qualifications will be useless as they will not be allowed to use them. There is the female mayor who says that she is now waiting for the Taliban to come for people like her and kill them. There is the Afghan journalist, now in hiding with his family, who said:

“There was a lot of promise, a lot of assurance. A lot of talk about values, a lot of talk about progress, about rights, about women’s rights, about freedom, about democracy. That all turned out to be hollow.”

That journalist is in danger of being proved right.

We have to do whatever we can now to honour our commitments to the people of Afghanistan. That starts with fixing our failed refugee and asylum-seeking system. For all the hand wringing of Government Ministers in the last few days, the reality is that their actions over the past few months have left thousands of ordinary Afghans in terrible danger. Interpreters and contractors who worked side by side with UK forces have been refused resettlement on the grounds that they were technically subcontractors. That is shameful.

I fear for the thousands of ordinary Afghans who supported the UK in delivering aid and supporting other projects, often in the interests of our foreign policy objectives. They are now at real risk of being seen as collaborators working against the Taliban's interest. The NGOs they worked with are now powerless to help them, but the UK Government are not, yet we have heard very little about what the Government are doing to persuade and support them. Many are not covered by the Afghan relocation and assistance programme because they worked for UK organisations other than the Government—for NGOs and other civil society organisations, even though they were paid by UK aid. They are in extreme danger, so that ARAP programme must be expanded to encompass them, too. The scheme was far too late to get off the ground and only started in April when Taliban advances and atrocities were already all too apparent, and it has been drawn all too narrowly. It must be amended to allow visas for the family of people who would have been eligible but who have died, and for people who have fled Afghanistan but would have been eligible had they remained in country.

The resettlement scheme announced by the Government last night is welcome, but it is not enough. Places must be based on need, not on numbers. There should be no artificial cap. When the Government are already failing to achieve their existing target of settling 5,000 refugees a year, we need to hear an awful lot more about how Ministers are planning to deliver for Afghan refugees and guarantees that local government will be properly funded to work with them.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD)

Does the hon. Lady agree that it is vital for local councils that have been willing for some time to take on additional refugees, such as mine in St Albans, to be given additional finance? For local government to support those refugees, it needs funding to help with finding furniture, relocation and connecting with utilities. All that support is needed so that the council itself can support refugees.

Caroline Lucas

I absolutely support the hon. Lady's comments. Such support is vital.

I call on the Home Secretary today to abandon the resettlement-only plans set out in the Nationality and Borders Bill, which would criminalise, or deny full refugee status to, those who make their own journeys to seek asylum in the UK. I call on her to grant immediate asylum to Afghans already waiting for status in the UK, release all Afghan nationals from detention, and urgently expand the family reunion route so that Afghans can be joined by other members of their family, including siblings and their parents. I was contacted by a constituent who used to work for the EU delegation in Kabul and whose siblings all worked for allied forces. He has asylum here in the UK and his siblings have asylum elsewhere, but his mother is left alone, desperate and very much a target. We absolutely need to widen the family reunion rules.

We also need not just to properly restore aid, but to increase it. The Foreign Secretary said that it is being doubled; I welcome that, but it is still less than the 2019 figure. We need to recognise that the need today is so much greater than it was even in 2019.

There are many lessons to be learned from this disaster. It looks as if our intelligence might well have been inadequate, our promises to the Afghan people worthless and our duty of care to ordinary Afghans who worked with us patchy and unreliable. More than that, this Afghan tragedy should be the catalyst that finally forces us to rethink how the so-called war on terror is fought. The debacle in Afghanistan, with the loss of almost a quarter of a million lives, is just one of four failed conflicts in the past 20 years. Western military action in Libya and Iraq and the air war against ISIS in Syria have all failed to achieve their objectives: ISIS is still active in Iraq and Syria, ISIS and al-Qaeda are active across the Sahel and eastern Africa, and there are still links with Afghanistan.

We urgently need to learn the lessons of failed wars of intervention and take an honest look at the objectives behind our foreign policy. For too long, protecting British interests has been about stability and safety through access to oil, maintaining the current balance of power and a very inconsistent approach—to put it mildly—to human rights and democracy. When we ally ourselves with countries such as Saudi Arabia, our moral credibility to speak about human rights is fundamentally undermined. We need a longer-term approach, including stopping arms sales to oppressive regimes that do not abide by international law, and a more consistent approach to democracy across the world.

The Government like to boast of our country being global Britain. If that is to mean anything, it surely has to be an opportunity to finally develop the ethical foreign policy that we have spoken about for so long, focused on seeking to build international consensus with co-operation, security and human rights at its heart.

13:22:00

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con)

Afghanistan today is a tragedy backlit by defeat—even the name of Operation Enduring Freedom has already exuded a sense of irony—but lest we rewrite history, let us remember why we went. We did not go to Afghanistan out of a sense of philanthropy towards the Afghan people; we went out of a hard-headed sense of protection of our own national security. Were we successful? Yes, we were: we were able to take down al-Qaeda networks in the region and beyond, and we did not see a repeat of 9/11. We owe an immeasurable debt to our armed forces. Those who say that their sacrifices were in vain utterly misunderstand the sacrifices that were made.

Are we safer than we were a week ago? Probably not. Under the Taliban, 5,000 of our most committed, vicious and determined enemies are out there once again, and they will seek their moment. We also need to understand that the strategic weakness of our alliance will have been noted not just in Kabul, but in Moscow, Beijing, Tehran and Islamabad.

Did we know that the Afghan Government would fall so swiftly? No, we did not. Many people today claim to have predicted it when they absolutely did not. The removal of 2,500 American troops, along with 8,000 coalition troops and 18,000 of those in support, brought about a catastrophic drop in morale among both the Afghan forces and the Afghan Government. It has been mentioned many times today that 70,000 Afghan police and armed forces died in the struggle to protect their own country. For anyone to say that they would not fight is a slight that is not worthy of any politician in a free country. But the question we must ask is: why, oh why, would anyone choose to remove their troops—even if they had decided to do so—during the fighting season, when the Taliban were at their greatest strength? The answer is that it was not a decision made for foreign policy or security reasons; it was done to suit a domestic political timetable. When security decisions are taken for political reasons, there is likely to be a detrimental outcome, and we would all do well to remember that lesson.

Although we did not go primarily for philanthropic reasons, rebuilding Afghanistan and giving its people a real chance of all the benefits that we take for granted became the main case used to maintain domestic public support for the mission in Afghanistan, and it was the main reason given to justify the continued sacrifices of our armed forces. They brought prosperity, political stability, human rights and the rule of law to the people of Afghanistan. It was an immense achievement, even on that timescale.

As one of the Defence Secretaries during the Afghan conflict, who had to send handwritten letters to the loved ones of those who died in action and visited many of the severely injured in hospital, including friends, I understand how raw the anger may be at the events of recent days. As several Members have said, those veterans will require extra support. For their sake and for its own sake, we must do all we can in concert with our allies to give support and sanctuary to all those who remain vulnerable in Afghanistan. Time is of the essence: the Taliban are already going door to door with their lists looking for victims. We must do everything we can as quickly as we can.

In Europe in recent days, there has been a lot of talk about how it is vulnerable to American decisions and has to ride on American coat-tails. The irony seems to be completely lost on those who refuse to build up their own security capacity that, in the end, they will actually become more dependent on American foreign policy, rather than less. Listening to our NATO allies who talk about why they should be spending—high-spending, big states in Europe—while American taxpayers carry the burden of security, one would think that they might have learned their lesson by now.

Finally, we can ultimately win the war in Afghanistan or against any similar oppressors only by winning the war of ideas, and we have to begin by believing that what we offer as a society is not just different from theirs, but better. We need to believe that democratic government is better than totalitarianism, that an impartial rule of law is better than theocracy, and that freedom and human rights are better than oppression and prejudice. Freedom will not come for free. There is a political and financial cost to be paid for it. If we are unwilling to pay for it, we have to accept the consequences.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

Order. There are still enormous numbers of colleagues trying to catch my eye so, after the next contribution, I will have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

13:27:00

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind)

In this sombre and very serious debate, there are two fundamental points I want to make. First, we have all been inundated overnight and in the past couple of days with emails from constituents and many others who are very worried about the plight of those who are trying to get out of Afghanistan, the numbers of people who ought to be supported and the approach that the British Government have taken. Members will have seen letters from the National Union of Journalists concerning journalists and their safety, from the University College Union concerning their students in this country and their fears, and from many, many others, including people representing trade unions in Afghanistan.

As well as that, I ask the Government clearly what their strategy is for allowing people to come to this country, because it is clear that all those who have worked for the British Army or any other organisation in Afghanistan should be allowed to come here. That is the case, likewise, for non-governmental organisations, but I would add to that those who have worked for contractors that have been contracted to the British or American services. They will be just as vulnerable in the future.

If we are serious about ensuring that all those refugees who wish to come here are able to get in, the Government have to do two things. First, they should respond to the very generous offers made by a lot of local authorities—I saw a letter last night from the leaders of Labour London borough councils—of doing everything they can to support refugees coming to this country. However, they need financial support to be able to house those people, accommodate them and ensure that they can be integrated into our society. There must also be a change in the Government's rhetoric about refugees in general. We cannot hold out a hand and say that we are going to welcome all the Afghan refugees here—I hope we do—when, at the same time, we are passing legislation that will criminalise those who save the lives at sea of people trying to get to this country, a place of safety. If we are an open society that welcomes refugees, we should mean that wherever refugees come from—not just Afghanistan. I hope the Government will bear that in mind and give us a clear outline of how people will get out of Afghanistan, how they will get here and how they will be processed when they get here.

Too many of us represent constituencies where refugees who do not have enough support are living. They are begging, homeless and street-sleeping while their

applications are endlessly processed. That is not the sign of a society or a Government who are holding out a hand of friendship towards refugees.

The war has cost the United States \$1 trillion and this country tens of billions of pounds. It has cost the lives of tens of thousands of Afghan people. It has driven many of them into asylum or refugee status in all the neighbouring countries. It has taken the lives of American soldiers, and soldiers of almost every other nationality that got involved, including 457 British soldiers. At the end of it, the trauma of those who served there and were injured there, and the mental health issues that pertain for soldiers coming out of service, are huge and likely to be exacerbated by what has happened over the past few days. We need to ensure there is proper support for those who have served and suffered in Afghanistan, and we also need a serious appraisal of how we got there in the first place.

Any examination of the longer-term history of Afghanistan will show that wars there fail. There were three in the 19th century and a number later. The great game of the 19th century was about preventing Russia from getting control of Afghanistan. Later, the cold war took over and the Americans supported the opposition to the Soviet Union, thus forming the mujaheddin, which morphed into the Taliban and so much else. There are some serious historical lessons to be learned about how we take major foreign policy decisions. It is beyond disappointing that the Prime Minister's response this morning appeared to be that he is not prepared to countenance a serious inquiry into all this.

I can hear my friend, the late Paul Flynn, speaking about the number of soldiers who died in Helmand. I can hear all those who spoke up against the intervention, not because they supported the Taliban and not because they were not serious about human rights, but because they were serious about a long-term peace in a world that recognises the historical position that we have got ourselves into. Now surely is the time for a sober reflection on the disaster that has happened in Afghanistan.

13:33:00

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con)

Like others, I have been to Afghanistan—not as a soldier, but as a 16-year-old teenager in 1978. It was in the last days of President Daoud's regime. A couple of days after he returned from Islamabad, where my father was working, Daoud was overthrown, executed and strung up. Afghanistan has been a failed state since,

which is tragic because it is a beautiful country. I remember it as vibrant and developing fast.

Much has been made and will be made in this debate about the tremendous sacrifice of our armed forces in Afghanistan. I know that many soldiers who served cared passionately about the Afghan people, and the job they were trying to do to bring about peace and security. We should not forget that our involvement in Afghanistan secured 20 years of freedom for its people. I can only hope that, from the ruins, some sense of how that feels will remain, and it will not totally revert back to extremist Islamic rule under the new Government.

The past 20 years have not been wasted. We have seen 40% of girls in education—9 million girls where there were none—with literacy rates of 56% and 70,000 female teachers. Four thousand midwives have been trained, up from 400 in 2001, and female MPs make up 28% of Parliament—we only make up 34% here, so they were doing incredibly well.

That is what has been achieved, and that is what our brave men and women have died for, but, like many in this House, I am a realist and hope is not much of a safeguard. The chance of any sort of progressive shift by the Taliban, now in complete control, seems remote. As co-chair of the all-party group on women, peace and security, I have spoken in this House several times in the past few months expressing my concern about the future of women in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of NATO troops. The premise of my concern has always been the encroachment of the Taliban, which has been going on for many years, and no one should have been surprised by its entry into Kabul. In the face of Taliban rule, my concern now has turned to deep anger and frustration that women and girls may again face subjugation in Afghanistan, despite the words of the Taliban leaders.

John Howell (Henley) (Con)

Will my hon. Friend join me in the work to try to ensure the protection of the Afghan women's orchestra, which came to this country in 2019 and made a big impression on the UK, and is now seriously under threat?

Mrs Drummond

Absolutely. There are many women's organisations that have come to the fore over the past 20 years, and it would be very sad if they disappeared.

Those brave women who joined the Afghan army now fear beheading. Girls face having their education taken away from them and women their rights to go and do as they please. There is the fear of sexual violence. There will be no women teachers, no women police officers and no women in political life. Women face being wiped from the face of Afghanistan unless they are prepared to subject themselves to Taliban rule. There are already signs that Afghan women have no faith whatsoever in any lessening of the Taliban grip. In Kabul, there are reports of nail shops blackening out their windows, music shops, destroying stock and women not going to work or walking alone. These mundane, simple, everyday things that all women in the world should have the right to do are all at grave risk. Although the feeling of impotence in this place is palpable, there is no reason to give in or to give up on Afghanistan and its people. We must do all we can to engage with the new regime and any country that has influence with it, and I am particularly focused on what Pakistan can do as a country that harboured Taliban leaders, plus any Gulf backers that have been supporting this group.

Afghanistan will need aid. Delivering it must come with stringent conditions on honouring women's rights, human rights and those of the ethnic minorities as well. This will need global consensus, and I hope that the Government are working extremely hard in this regard right now to ensure that the Taliban has the international community breathing down its neck from day one.

My one final thought is how lucky I am to stand here in the House of Commons able to say what I think, and, in honour of those brave Afghan women fearing the very worst right now, I will not forget it.

13:37:00

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)

My involvement in Afghanistan is through my co-worker and friend Marzia Babakarkhail. Marzia was an Afghan judge who had to flee her home in Afghanistan as the Taliban tried to assassinate her. Her crime was that she had set up schools for women and girls. Marzia does not want our sympathy; she wants our action. She wants to help the thousands of women activists and others who have supported us over the past 20 years. Many of these women face not just the obliteration of their rights, but potential genocide.

Despite the warm words of the Taliban, which too many have been willing just to accept, there have been reports of women being sent home from their jobs and told to send their male relatives instead, girls as young as 10 being sold off to

Taliban fighters, mothers having their eyes gouged out in front of their children, and reprisals being carried out against those who work for Afghan authorities. As others have said, we need deeds not words. If the Taliban has changed and it wants to engage with the international community, it needs to demonstrate exactly what this means. As a start, it means that those who want to leave and have a place of refuge get safe passage, and that applies to where they are in Afghanistan now, not when they are on a plane. There are numerous reports of roadblocks and people being beaten as they try to get through those roadblocks on their approach to the airport.

In addition to Ambassador Bristow, I want to thank Ministers, especially Lord Tariq Ahmad who has been working around the clock helping me with a particularly devastating case, and other officials as well. Time is running out. There was pandemonium on Monday and I am getting messages literally by the minute. People are having to move literally every couple of hours, and one woman I am helping has moved 11 times since Monday.

I am pleased that the Government are finally increasing the number of refugee places, but we need more information about the speed, detail and follow through. I am also reminded of the child refugee pledges that were not kept.

In the short term, the role of Pakistan will be absolutely key. Pakistan already has 3 million Afghan refugees. The situation is going to get much worse in the coming weeks and months, at a time when the UK is cutting aid. I would be grateful if the Foreign Secretary would say that aid will be restored, particularly in relation to this issue. Pakistan also has a potential role to play in moderating the influence of the Taliban. This is a challenge and an opportunity for Pakistan. It is very keen about human rights across Kashmir, as it should be, but we need to make sure that that applies and see whether it can have an impact on the region as a whole and in particular on the Taliban.

Finally, Pakistan has been clear that it needs help from the international community in managing the 1,600-mile Durand line, keeping the region terrorist free. That is something that we could do collectively. That porous border poses a threat not just to Pakistan but to us all. In the long term, global Britain must work with its allies to restore not just our reputation but our role in facilitating a law and rules-based system and human rights across the world.

13:41:00

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)

I rise to speak in this Chamber for the first time since my wife's suicide in June last year. I would like to personally thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and many other right hon. and hon. Members from right around the House for the tremendous messages of support and condolence that you have sent me.

It is with no great pleasure that I stand to speak at the time of the UK's biggest humiliation since Suez and of the US's biggest humiliation since Saigon. The mood of the House is so different. I remember when the Taliban were evicted. The Labour Government went in with all-party support—apart from some very prescient comments by people such as the late Sir Peter Tapsell, the then Member for Louth and Horncastle—because we believed in nation building and in keeping terrorists at arm's length and a very long way away from our streets after 9/11. There was then a period of very intense military activity, but we ended up with a muddled, messy Afghanisation in recent years.

The Afghan army has fought incredibly bravely—70,000 of them died—supported by us and the Americans technically from the air. President Biden drew a completely false choice. The choice was not between total immersion of American forces and the loss of American lives, which was going to do damage in the mid-terms, and pulling out. He could have carried on with 4,500 American troops and sophisticated air support. That would have sent a message to every Afghan army unit that if they were in trouble, they could call for American support. When it was announced that they were going, that sent a real message to the Taliban: “You're safe, boys. Take every village and take every town, because the American air force is not coming after you.”

It is frankly shameful that the President of the United States—the leader of the free world—cannot face questions from his own hostile press corps but attacks the Afghan army for cowardice. We are now in a mess. China, Russia and Iran are hostile. What are we going to say to citizens in Taiwan, India, Pakistan and western Ukraine? They will all be worried.

The UK has a real role to play. Our recent review was worthless. We now have to cope with a weak American President, and, as the Prime Minister said this morning, the UK, leading the G7, has to step up. We have to review the review. We have to consider how we handle this.

In the short time I have left, I pay tribute to our armed forces. I am very proud to represent the 1 Royal Irish Regiment, based in Tern Hill in my constituency. I also saw them when I was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) mentioned those funerals—I was there for three of them. Those veterans are very proud of what they did, and we should remember what they did: they brought women’s rights, and a concrete building in southern Afghanistan was turned from an ammunition dump into a girls’ school. We should remember them and we should remember the pressures they are under now.

These images will be shocking for those veterans. Combat Stress has had a doubling of applications for help in the last few days—it already looks after 15,000 to 16,000. We can all help: the Government can help through the NHS, the MOD contributes 25% of its funds, and every one of us—every constituent—can help Combat Stress now.

This is in our hands. I entirely endorse the comments about interpreters and getting other people out, but these are our citizens. Every time they look at the screen, the horrors of their experience in Afghanistan will come back. We owe it to those veterans now to go out and look after them.

13:46:00

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op)

I am sure I speak on behalf of everyone in passing on condolences to the Member who has just spoken.

What we are dealing with here is a failure of leadership, not of the military that served that leadership—we should never confuse the two. Both western and Afghan forces have served with great courage and are responsible for the successes achieved in the 20 years. It is a failure to understand Afghanistan and how the Taliban capitalised on UK and US forces’ counter-insurgency approaches, and the corruption of tribal leadership.

The Pashtun saying, “You have all the watches, we have all the time” reflects the speed with which the Taliban have acted. They took their first city just 12 days ago and now they have Kabul. But just as this was not inevitable, or indeed unexpected, so it is not inevitable that all we can do is despair.

The Taliban said on Monday that those who worked with foreign forces have nothing to fear as long as they show remorse. Do not tell them that they are cowards or that they should stay; help them get out. The bureaucracy that our interpreters, support staff and their families face must not be the reason why they lose their lives. I urge the Government to talk to the current and former servicemen and women who know those people, rather than asking people about paperwork, bureaucracy and biometric tests, because that is what is keeping people in Kabul airport right now.

Yes, the airport matters, but people have to get through the checkpoints to get to Kabul, so we need an extraction plan for everyone. We need to be clear on whom we owe a duty to: not just the interpreters, but the women who set up schools and the people who stood up when we asked them to work in the embassies and NGOs. The resettlement scheme is very welcome, but resettling from where, and how? Wars and persecution do not work to a timetable for paperwork.

Like many, in Walthamstow I have families who are desperate. There is an interpreter for the UK, whose dad did the same job for the Americans, and the Taliban are looking for them both. Another is here but his disabled family members in Kabul are at risk because he helped the MOD. Are we comfortable that mum or dad or brother or sister is fair game for the Taliban as punishment? Of course we need family reunion to be part of the settlement scheme. Or there is the family who walked for four hours to get to the embassy but have an Afghan mother. Are we really going to separate them? Or there is the man who has been trying to get his wife out since 2018 but, because of Covid, her visa was delayed.

Numbers matter less than need. We need to reject this artificial distinction between resettlement and asylum. I am pleased to hear the Prime Minister commit not to send people back, but I hope the Home Secretary was listening, because the same Ministers who proudly boast about stopping boats forget to tell us that it is Afghans on those boats—people who have been fleeing this situation.

Instead of posturing, we need to challenge Macron and our European partners, and work with them, to ensure that everybody does their fair share to help. We need to get ahead of this crisis because at the moment we are always playing catch-up. President Biden may not have spoken to other world leaders since the fall of Kabul, so I am pleased to hear that the Prime Minister is, because we need to get agreement, via the UN and NATO, that if the Taliban provide a safe haven for al-Qaeda or ISIS, we will not stand for it. We need assurances from our

counterparts in China and Russia that they will not veto action at the Security Council either.

Yes, this is a humanitarian disaster, but it is also a human rights one. Equality is not just being able to leave the house alone. Those Afghan women who are doctors, judges and politicians need us to do more than wring our hands. We have already heard that girls are being banned from school and forced into marriages. As the quote goes, “The Taliban talk nice during the day and disappear people at night.”

We must also say that this is not Islam. Islam is not the reason why people are clinging to planes to save their lives—that is brutalism and terrorism. We must not let people divide us here or overseas in the fight for those values. There may have been a failure of leadership so far, but it does not have to continue if we work together.

13:49:00

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con)

I thank the Government for proposing a bespoke refugee scheme focusing on the most vulnerable in Afghanistan. I am glad that, as the Home Secretary said today, it will include persecuted minorities—those who are persecuted simply on account of their religion or belief. That is absolutely in accord with our Government’s commitment to promoting and defending freedom of religion or belief for all as a key human rights priority.

As the Prime Minister’s special envoy on FORB, I welcome that, but I offer a word of caution. We have heard that the scheme will be similar to the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, but for some minority groups who were targeted for their beliefs, including Yazidis, Christians and Shi’as, that scheme was not as effective as was intended. Those groups were disproportionately under-represented in refugee referrals to the UK—indeed, substantially so. One reason was that the scheme outsourced the selection of refugees to the UNHCR, whose vulnerability criteria did not include people who were being targeted for their faith. Another factor was that many, particularly Christians, were too afraid to enter the refugee camps where selection took place because they feared that within those camps, they would face the very persecution that they had experienced outside. I hope that we can learn from that.

Persecution in Afghanistan is extreme. As the US Commission on International Religious Freedom reports, groups such as Hindus, Christians and Sikhs remain endangered minorities. Many have fled the country, and many of their community leaders who remained have been killed. Yesterday, I spoke virtually with an Afghan Christian, and he confirmed that the Taliban are already knocking on doors in Kabul, requiring people to go to worship in the mosques and identifying those who refuse. Those so identified fear the worst for their lives. That is particularly true of publicly known faith leaders and house church leaders in local neighbourhoods. Their neighbours know them, and I am told that they fear being outed by their own neighbours.

It is vital that there is urgent international co-ordination to help the religious minorities in Afghanistan who face persecution. The UK should not have to tackle this alone, but nor does it need to. Offers of help with international co-ordination are available, as I heard yesterday from an international NGO with which I spoke. I thank the Home Secretary and her staff for how, even overnight, they are actively engaging with me on this issue. She has said:

“I want to ensure that as a nation we do everything possible to provide support to the most vulnerable”,

and:

“The UK is ... doing all it can to encourage other countries to help ... we want to lead by example”.

That is right, which is why I have welcomed plans for the G7 virtual meeting next week. It is also why I have welcomed all that our Foreign Secretary has done, not only to initiate this but more widely to show international leadership on FORB. In May this year in London, at the Foreign and Development Ministers’ meeting, a communiqué was issued—I can only quote a fraction—confirming:

“We commit to co-ordinated action ... and targeted support ... to defend freedom of religion or belief for all ... and combatting all forms of hatred and discrimination ... the G7 will enhance efforts toward the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief globally.”

This is the moment to translate those words into action, and I am confident that under our presidency of the G7, our Foreign Secretary will have freedom of religion or belief at the forefront of his mind next week. It is also our opportunity

to show the world the reality of the words in chapter 2 of our new immigration plan—to ensure support for those, such as persecuted Christians, who need emergency resettlement.

13:53:00

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)

I have three issues that I want to raise today. First, as a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, I am concerned about what events in Afghanistan will mean for UK national security. With President Biden forging ahead with President Trump’s deal with the Taliban, we risk Afghanistan returning to its pre-9/11 position and presenting a global terror threat, an ally for despots and a base for jihadi terrorists and crime networks, including the drug warlords who flood the streets of our country with heroin.

President Biden, who told us very recently, “The USA is back!” says that

“there was never a good time to withdraw US forces”,

but I fear he may now learn the hard way that there is never a good time to allow an illegitimate terror regime to take power. A false binary choice has been made between full-on military engagement and a rushed, chaotic withdrawal. There were, and are, other options.

Worse still, our holidaying Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary allowed this catastrophe to unfold with barely a whisper. The UK currently heads the G7, we hold a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and we are founder members of NATO, but where is the international leadership from our Prime Minister? So much for global Britain, with our shrunken influence and reputation. The Prime Minister declares that Afghanistan must not become a “breeding ground” for terrorists, and I agree, but wishing these ends does not render the means to fulfil them. What is he going to do? We must now ask whether the assessment of our security needs in the integrated review, published only in March, needs an early update.

Secondly, we have sleepwalked into opening up a new front in the global refugee crisis, which our Home Office has already struggled to cope with. With our allies in the EU and Commonwealth, we must ensure that aid reaches those in need—and this is after the Government cut the UK contribution to the Afghanistan humanitarian response plan by 76%. We now have the added task of avoiding aid’s

falling into the hands of the Taliban. I can only urge the Government that we must do our fair share in providing safe havens, sanctuary and support for all those left with nothing.

Thirdly, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary human rights group, I am appalled at the prospect of a new dark age descending on Afghans. As Hillary Clinton said,

“human rights are women’s rights, and women’s rights are human rights”.

After all the sacrifices, 20 years of human rights progress for women and girls will be swept away with the return of a perverted, medieval theocracy. Women will be erased from public life, the right to education will be severely limited and violence, rape and forced child marriage will be routine weapons of oppression.

Brave female politicians, teachers, medics, scientists, journalists and judges will be targeted by the Taliban. Those who worked with the coalition forces are already being subjected to brutal reprisals from the Taliban, as are those dedicated to protecting fundamental human rights such as the right to education, healthcare, freedom of expression and freedom of association. Members of ethnic and religious minorities, not least Christians, are now at greater risk in Afghanistan.

Those now in mortal danger deserve more than vacuous slogans about solidarity. The Government’s integrated review also had a section on defending human rights, promoting gender equality and much else. That sounds utterly empty now.

13:57:00

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)

The summary of the NATO 2021 Brussels summit confirmed the end of NATO’s military operations in Afghanistan, while restating the pillars of NATO’s new relationship with and support for Afghanistan: ongoing training and financial support for the Afghan national army, ongoing diplomatic engagement, transitional funding to ensure the continuing functioning of Kabul airport, dialogue on Afghanistan with relevant international and regional partners, and support for the ongoing peace process. Clearly, there is no support to be offered to the Afghan national army any more, and the peace process lies in tatters. What has unfolded in the past month goes down as one of NATO’s great failures. However, within that communiqué lie some important points. An ongoing

diplomatic engagement is an important way forward. Kabul airport will probably function through support from the Russians and the Chinese, and we must recognise that the ongoing diplomatic engagement will make for some uncomfortable partners that we will have to deal with.

The reality is that the original NATO operation to remove the al-Qaeda threat from those terrorist camps was successful. The time spent over the past 20 years to stabilise the country and push out the al-Qaeda camps has led to a situation where the Taliban now say they would not allow terrorist organisations to set up camp again in Afghanistan. That must be part of the focus of diplomatic work. It is now a diplomatic mission to hold them to account.

The reality is that not a single serviceman's life was lost in vain, as so much has been achieved. Although each civilian life lost is a tragedy, everything was done by NATO to prevent civilian casualties. That is why I believe there is not huge support for the Taliban, and it shows there is an important mission to come.

One of the important countries we must deal with is Pakistan. Imran Khan, the Prime Minister, rightly spoke of his frustration that the Americans come to Pakistan only when they want Pakistan to sweep up the mess they have left behind. I understand that frustration, but Pakistan is an important nation that we need to work with to try to hold the Taliban to some of their Qatar commitments. Ultimately, we need to deal with the situation as it sits today. We need to make sure those gains are not lost. Equally, as has been said many times in the House today, we must try to prevent the humanitarian catastrophe for human rights and women's rights if the clock is turned back. That will all require diplomatic effort and it will require financial input and financial sanctions when the time comes. One of the real tests will be whether we and our NATO allies reopen our embassies, which will be an important step towards the Taliban showing they are willing to stand by their Qatar agreements and whether we can work with them. Whether sanctions have to be put on the state will be part of that.

The Taliban have declared that the war is over, so I leave the House with a thought that many have heard before: at the end of war-war, we have to engage in jaw-jaw.

14:01:00

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)

The actions of our armed forces, those of the United States and other allies, and the Afghan forces themselves have made a big difference to the lives of people in Afghanistan over the past 20 years. We have heard a lot today about the importance of education for millions of girls, about the value of the freedom that allowed women to work, about the political representation, the elections and the diversity of representation that would have been unthinkable under the Taliban, and much more. To suggest that the last 20 years were a mistake, that none of it should have happened, is to dismiss the importance of those fundamental gains. It is to dismiss the importance of one of the biggest movements of refugees back into a country in living memory.

I visited the Pul-i-Charkhi refugee processing centre many years ago, shortly after the Taliban had fallen. I spoke to people there and asked them why they had come home. They answered, "Because there is hope for our country." The measure of what has been gained will now be seen in what is lost. It can be seen in the desperation of people clinging to the undercarriage of planes leaving the country. It can be seen in the palpable fear of those who feel their freedom and safety are now under threat.

All these gains were made possible only because of the commitment we made, and because of the 457 members of our armed forces who never came home. Members on both sides of the House served alongside them. All those soldiers made a huge and positive difference to the lives of the Afghan people. There was not peace in the whole country, and violence still killed many, but undoubtedly great gains were made.

Let us be clear that the Taliban are in control of Afghanistan today, not because we intervened in 2001 but because we abandoned it in 2021. The defence of the position that has been adopted is that we cannot go on forever, but our role had radically changed. Far fewer troops, less frontline fighting and more of a support role. The question has to be: was this withdrawal necessary now? Was this outcome inevitable?

Many times in this House we have debated intervention. It is a difficult choice and when it happens, we know that ownership of the consequences follows. But be in no doubt: the events of recent weeks show that not intervening has consequences too, and those consequences are just as real for the Afghan people. Are we going

to pretend that they matter less because we do not feel we own them? What is our message to oppressed people around the world after this? Are we going to console ourselves with tweets of solidarity which offer them nothing? That is not a foreign policy, it is not a moral stand; it is just a pose, and the oppressed people around the country—around the world—deserve better than that.

So where do we stand in the world now? What does rhetoric about global Britain mean in the face of what has happened in the past few weeks? Where do we stand with the United States, when the limitations of our ability to act have been so brutally exposed? This is the question that will be asked of the west now. It is about trust in our word and trust in our faith, and recent weeks have been a major setback to both.

14:05:00

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)

May I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests for the support that I get from the RAMP—Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy—project? I would also like to pay tribute to the Army Air Corps, based in my constituency, which over the last 20 years has played such a significant role in Afghanistan, and to gallant Members across the House who have personalised the story in their contributions today.

I start by commending my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for the scheme that he is putting in place to ensure that we can prioritise women and girls and bring them to safety. He and I do not always see eye to eye, but this scheme absolutely is the bespoke one that I have been calling for over the last few days. But time is of the essence and detail is missing, and that is my big worry. How are we going to bring those people to safety in the time that we have to do it? For 18 months, I lived the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, and I know the complexities and the difficulties with, on occasion, pettifogging bureaucracy. I know how hard it is to get the referrals and make sure that people have the right vulnerabilities identified, and how difficult it is to work on the ground when people are in camps, all in one place.

The women of Afghanistan are not in one place; they are in hiding. They do not necessarily have the documentation that they need to find their routes to safety. What are those routes to safety? We need to know as a matter of urgency. My concern is that the women of Afghanistan do not have the six years that we are talking about with the VPR scheme or, actually, six months. They did not even have

six days before they were forced back into burqas and turned away from their university places, or before the bank tellers were told that they had to go home because their jobs were to be taken by men. They were told it would all be okay so long as they live under Islamic law, but what is the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law? What will it actually look like for them?

My email inbox has had a number of comments from people telling me that I have to have trust in the Taliban and that they are not as bad as they once were. I will judge them by their actions, not their words. I saw the terrible scenes at Kabul airport, where Afghan nationals had no confidence in their words and were clinging desperately to the underside of planes to escape. In particular, what of the women teachers who were giving education to girls? What of the civic leaders whom we encouraged to stand as mayors and take up roles in civic society? What of the doctors and the medics, or the midwives we heard about earlier? They are the ones most likely to suffer reprisals.

I want to talk briefly about the experience of my constituents, Monica and Sonila, who are still waiting after two years for a decision on their asylum claim. Now is the time to grant all those claims, because they cannot be returned to Afghanistan. They are educated women who have been active in society and are journalists. They would be at risk, but what of their mother and their younger sister, who are still in Afghanistan? I argued at the Dispatch Box for refugee family reunion to allow teenage girls who are over 18 to be allowed to come here. Our children do not suddenly become independent because they pass a day over their 18th birthday, so refugee family reunion in this instance has to ensure that those girls are able to come here. Would we leave our daughters in Afghanistan, with 12-year-old girls taken from their homes? I will not use the term "forced into marriage"; they are abducted and raped by men old enough to be their grandfathers.

We have to do more and we have to do it quickly. The scheme that the Government are putting in place is a good start, but it is just a start. This needs to be the fastest resettlement that we have seen since Uganda or the Kindertransport, so that we can continue to stand at the Dispatch Box and say that we have a proud history of being a safe haven for resettlement.

14:10:00

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab)

The situation unfolding in Afghanistan is of deep concern for the whole international community, and the potential for a tragic humanitarian crisis is clear. Many thousands will now be attempting to flee the Taliban, who have swiftly seized power after the withdrawal of US troops. The message is clear: the international community, including the UK, has failed the people of Afghanistan. Twenty years of armed intervention, and the commitment of more than 100,000 British service personnel, has not prevented the return of the Taliban, and has left many Afghan people in a dire situation.

In every respect, our interventions in Afghanistan have been an abject failure, resulting in a powder keg that threatens regional stability. That must signal loud and clear that a change in direction is needed. Military action has failed and cost the lives of countless Afghan civilians and British service personnel. We must now set out to work alongside the international community to find solutions that prioritise the safeguarding and wellbeing of Afghan people, and that particularly set out to protect women and girls. As such, it is imperative that the UK Government provide a safe haven for those fleeing that country. In that, we must not fail the Afghan people and those seeking asylum here must be given a safe passage and allowed to rebuild their lives. We must not cherry-pick who to save and who to turn away. Instead, we must put compassion at the forefront of our response. Given the UK's role in what is now happening in Afghanistan, that is the least we can do if we care at all about justice.

Afghanistan is now a powder keg that threatens regional stability in an area where conflict between major nuclear powers is already a terrifying possibility. Real tensions already exist between India, Pakistan, Iran and China, and the worsening situation in Afghanistan will only add to them. Given its long and prominent role in facilitating and exacerbating conflict in the region, if the UK is to redeem itself, it must fully commit to working alongside the international community to find ways of de-escalating regional tensions. We must use our relationships with powers in the region to push for a peaceful solution to outstanding conflicts, including the ongoing Indian occupation of Kashmir. Just over two years ago, article 370 of the Indian constitution was revoked, and if we look at the atrocities and abuses that are happening, we cannot talk about Afghanistan in isolation and completely ignore conflicts in the rest of the region. If regional powers set aside their differences and work together, I believe we will be able to avoid further bloodshed.

14:13:00

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)

This is a difficult and upsetting debate, and I am not quite sure why. It may be because some of the people I knew are now dead and because I do not think that some of the things that are being said are true. I want to set the record straight and, in the short time I have, correct some of the false assumptions that are being made and also make a few observations. I pay tribute to the many hon. Members who have made excellent speeches, especially the Chairman of Foreign Affairs Committee and the Chairman of the Defence Committee, whose speeches were incredibly good.

What has happened is an appalling and unnecessary self-inflicted wound. We are being presented with a choice: invest more blood and treasure or walk away. No: we had a steady state, give or take, in Afghanistan for the last few years, and the mission was a train, equip and mentor one. It was large, but for between 5,000 and 20,000 troops, contractors, special forces and so on who were there, it was smaller than many NATO/US bases and missions around the world. We have chosen to withdraw politically; we have not been forced to do so on security grounds. I think we will regret that decision for many years.

The collapse happened because a truly dreadful US President, Donald Trump, who was probably in hock to the Russians, dealt with the Taliban behind the Afghan Government's back—a shocking betrayal. Joe Biden, who admires Kennedy—we had some great quotes from Kennedy earlier—could have changed things. He has chosen not to and has opened the United States, Europe, India and many allies throughout the world to considerable terrorist risks from the 2,500 to 4,000 jihadi nut jobs—pardon my French—who are currently being released from Bagram, Kandahar and Kabul. When they have stopped slaughtering our friends and beheading a few key women journalists, they will turn their attention to us. We have walked away from a successful anti-terrorist operation after 20 years. Sooner or later, we will reap the rewards.

Many people have said that the Afghans did not fight. I was in Afghanistan four times over seven months, not on long tours—four months, two months and a few weeks. In my experience, many Afghans fought very hard. At first, yes, there was an uneven flow of recruits to the police, but I had the privilege of patrolling in Nade-Ali north with a small team. Those people were remarkable. When we went into a village, they would tell us from where the Taliban were watching us—which

haystack, which bund line. They would tell us that the motor cycle repair man had to work for the Taliban because his wife and children were under threat. They also told us that they would happily take their daughters to school, but asked why they should when there was not enough security to prevent them from being raped and abducted on the way home. Sometimes it was difficult to give them an answer that reassured.

In many ways, those people were a model of courageous integrity. They were effective and efficient, they loved their country and they knew right from wrong. They are probably dead. If they were not killed a year ago, they will be finished off as we speak, and I find that upsetting.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)

My hon. Friend from the Foreign Affairs Committee makes an excellent point, which has been made by a few others. He always looks at these things with a keen eye. Given what he has just said, is it not offensive that those people's contribution has been swept away, particularly by the President in the past few days?

Bob Seely

Yes, absolutely. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. To dismiss the 70,000 people who have died is absolutely wrong. People were uneven at times, especially in the beginning, but there were many brave male and female soldiers, journalists and people who engaged in civil society. They will now be shut down. They will not all be murdered. The Taliban are clever: they will carry out some high-profile assassinations to silence others, but the direction of travel is clear.

The Secretary of State for Defence, who is in his place, is one of the few people who has emerged from this with any credit because he can see the bigger picture. He has understood the geopolitics, the rationale, but also the emotions of many troops who have served in Afghanistan. He has shared that and I thank him very much for it.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) said, Russia and China are happier today and Taiwan and Ukraine are considerably more nervous. We are weaker. As several hon. Members have said, Europe has been as bad as the United States in not stepping up to the mark. A weak and divided west is not a recipe for a caring future for anybody. It is a recipe for global instability and greater global threat.

14:19:00

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)

Diolch yn fawr, Madam Ddirprwy Lefarydd. First, I would like to pay tribute to our service personnel who are putting their lives on the line in Kabul to evacuate our citizens safely, and to those who have served in Afghanistan these last 20 years.

The west failed in its mission and the UK Government bear their share of responsibility, but now is not the time to question how we got here nor how our allies have behaved. It remains the case that the UK Government have a practical and moral responsibility to thousands upon thousands of people in Afghanistan. We must ensure the swift and safe evacuation of UK nationals, UK personnel and Afghan nationals linked to the British NATO mission and to charitable and non-military efforts. I urge the Government to expand their Afghan relocation and assistance policy to all locally engaged staff and their families, regardless of whether they served in exposed, enabling roles or not. We must help too those people who dared to share our cherished values, especially journalists and women in senior civil society roles, those who worked with UK-affiliated charities and NGOs, and women in the judiciary, in the Government and in education.

Wales, of course, has a long and proud history of providing sanctuary to those fleeing persecution. Communities across Wales and the rest of the UK are ready to show the same compassion today. I must refer to the counties of Gwynedd and Ceredigion, whose intentions have been declared as well, but to whom the funding is critical to the numbers that they can accept.

The announcement of the resettlement scheme is a positive step. None the less, the 5,000 cap this year is arbitrary and insufficient. It is vital that the Government provide safe routes for Afghan refugees and end—this is clear now, as we have heard from others—the deportation of those already here. We must expedite procedures. There is a question about whether being an Afghan citizen is now sufficient, in terms of resettlement, to qualify as being in “well-founded fear of persecution”. We must look at the opportunity in the here and now, and not put up barriers and use the routes that we would conventionally use. We must look at how we can address the present situation as best we can. The Government must also consider whether the Nationality and Borders Bill is in keeping with these new circumstances and with the UK’s clear duty of responsibility to the Afghan people.

I would like to question the Government on another point, to which I would like a response when they wind up the debate. Reports are emerging that there is now

only a 72-hour window before the US pulls out of Kabul airport. We are indeed in that 72-hour window now. This will endanger the UK's and other allies' efforts to evacuate citizens and eligible local nationals. We must make every effort to secure the time to do the right thing. Will the Government today guarantee that the evacuation operation from Kabul airport will continue until 31 August, which was the declared timetable of both the US and UK Governments? Will the Government still be there, with representatives able to send people out of Kabul airport, to the end of this month?

Finally, it is clear that our greatest and only success after 20 years in Afghanistan has been the rights of women and girls. Will the Government commit today to do everything in their power to encourage the Taliban to protect those advancements and the lives, livelihoods, freedoms and rights of Afghan women and girls?

14:23:00

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con)

As a former soldier, I have watched the scenes of chaos with great sadness—sadness for the 457 men and women of our own armed forces who died doing their duty and for the scores of others with life-changing injuries. Was it all for nothing? I hope that they do not think so, because their courage and sacrifice lit a torch in a dark place that the Taliban, however hard they try, will find impossible to totally extinguish. As we have heard, they also prevented any terrorist attack on the west for 20 years from Afghanistan. I also pay tribute to all those brave Afghans who have helped us over the past 20 years. I hope that we can evacuate all those who need to get out. We must never ever forget the men and women, our allies and friends, without whom we could not have borne our share of the burden over all these years.

Although I know that the Government are doing all that they can to bring some semblance of order to the withdrawal, it is a fact that not all will escape the vengeance of the Taliban, despite the current amnesty, in which I have no confidence. My concern now, as has been expressed by many in the House, is that this rushed withdrawal will create—perhaps I should say, is creating—a vacuum. From now, we face a resurgent fundamentalism in Afghanistan, the prospect of the country once more harbouring those who would do us harm, and significant growth in the drug trade from which the Taliban will get their funds. While the Taliban want only to export their heroin, others will use the ungoverned space to foment and spread their extremist ideology. We have only to look at why we went

into Afghanistan almost exactly 20 years ago to see what that means. Countries such as Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran are already circling like sharks, and I shudder to think what the future holds, not only for the Afghans but for the west. We must not be naive and accept without evidence that the Taliban will soften their stance, as many honourable colleagues have said. That will have to be proven.

I would like to end—I am referring to my phone, which I do not like to do—with a comment from a very distinguished general. The Defence Secretary is the Chamber and, as a former soldier, I feel that I have a duty to read what the general says, as he served in Afghanistan on many occasions:

“I hope someone will ask what price the Defence Review? The Defence Secretary’s filleting of the army means it could not sustain an operation in Afghanistan or elsewhere. If the last few days show anything, it is that you have to be able to sustain an operation over decades. Strategic patience” —

a word used by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) in his excellent speech—

“is all. The cut of 10,000 troops from the army removes that capability.”

To sum up, in the short time I have left, he ends by saying:

“I guess the strategic point is this. Afghanistan is a disaster of strategic proportions, with implications for our foreign policy, defence policy, for NATO, and for our relationship with the US itself. And what is our response? To cut our army by 10,000. Some signal of our intent, some signal to our allies.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)

Order. I want to try to get as many people in as possible—not everyone will get in, in my view—so after the next speaker, I will reduce the time limit to three minutes. I call Hilary Benn.

14:27:00

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)

Thank you very much indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The events of the past few days have caused a great deal of sadness and fear: the sadness, as we have heard, of the members of our armed forces and their families, as the memories come flooding back; and fear on the part of the people of Afghanistan that all the gains that have been made will disappear. Perhaps the best answer to those who ask, “Was it worth it?” is to be found in the desperation of those who are trying to flee the country. They know better than any of us what was achieved, what it meant, and why they fear it will now be lost. For each of them, it was not for nothing.

We need to ask ourselves some hard questions. Why did it come as a surprise that the Government and the forces that we had supported, funded, trained and sought to build up over many years at the last appeared to be made of sand as the Taliban advance took city after city. Was it right of the Americans to announce such a precipitate withdrawal? I think that the mood of the House is no, it was not right, because the speed of their retreat undermined confidence and destroyed hope.

It is essential that we learn the lessons, and I hope that the Government will change their mind about the need for an inquiry—not to be wise after the event, not to find scapegoats, not to point out failures, but to understand what happened. That is for tomorrow, however. Today, the question is how will the Taliban choose to behave? We have all watched the interviews, and it is quite clear that many people in Afghanistan do not choose to believe what they have been told by their new leaders. We know the record—they know the record—of human rights abuses. We must remember that there was no democracy then, and the Taliban have no mandate now; they have the power that comes out of the barrels of their guns.

On the central question of the rights of women and girls, it is, as we have heard, the Taliban’s interpretation of sharia law that then means the subjugation of women. That is what it is about: the subjugation of women. Only time will tell us whether the women of Afghanistan will continue to be able to play a full and equal part in the country’s future.

There has been in the debate a large measure of agreement on the tasks that face us immediately to get people out. Will Ministers please brief Members of Parliament on how the system is working and what we can do when constituents contact us to make sure that their information is passed on? Will Ministers also reassure us that no bureaucracy is getting in the way? My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) made the point that paperwork is all very well,

but how do people get the paperwork when they are hiding in a basement because the Taliban are patrolling the street above?

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op)

My right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is making an excellent speech. Our local council, Leeds, has already said that it stands ready to take people from Afghanistan into temporary accommodation, but we need safe routes across the land borders. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government need to ensure that the borders are open and there is safe passage from third countries to the UK?

Hilary Benn

I agree completely. The people of Leeds and the city of Leeds have always had a big heart and we will play our part. There will be a refugee crisis, and we know from the past that the vast majority of people end up in the neighbouring countries. They will need financial support from us and some will come to this country. I welcome the scheme announced, but the test of that scheme is not the numbers promised but the numbers who are able to make it here. Under the Nationality and Borders Bill, an Afghan who finally makes it to the northern coast of France, gets in a boat and knowingly enters the United Kingdom without permission could face a prison sentence of up to four years. I hope that Ministers will explain that they do not intend to apply that provision to those who are fleeing persecution.

The Taliban may now be back in power but, as many have said, we will judge them on what they do, not on what they say. As has been said, we will need brave journalists to bear witness to what now happens in Afghanistan, so that the truth can be told. They will be judged, and we will be judged, above all by the people of Afghanistan, for what we do now in response to the tragedy that is unfolding before our eyes.

14:23:00

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con)

Other speakers in this debate have had far more direct experience and have spoken movingly of what this tragedy means to them and their colleagues—former soldiers and airmen. I was able to visit Afghanistan before the end of the combat mission seven years ago, and on each occasion I was enormously impressed by the commitment and dedication of our armed forces, working

alongside allies from many other countries and members of the Afghan defence force in seeking to provide security for the Afghan people.

In most contributions today from both sides of the House it has been notable how the service and sacrifice of our armed forces have been appreciated and recognised for keeping us safe by preventing further international terror attacks from Afghanistan. We are proud of their heroism and must support veterans at this difficult time. Their efforts came at great cost in terms of lives lost, injuries sustained and money spent. But, as others have said, much was achieved: Afghanistan ceased to be a safe haven for terrorist groups; the lives of women and girls, particularly in the cities, were transformed; as we have heard, millions of girls have been to school to receive an education that cannot be unlearned; and women were able to work and to take part in government at regional and national levels. There is no hiding from the fact that all that has now come to a humiliating end. Despite yesterday's statements of good intent from the Taliban spokesman, we all recall with trepidation their dark-ages ideology of violence and repression.

When I was in Camp Bastion, I was struck by the commitment of the medics who worked in the field hospital and treated those who had been injured on both sides of the conflict. In some cases, Taliban fighters and British soldiers were in adjacent wards. I hope that such magnanimous humanitarian generosity will be remembered by those who have now taken control of the country.

Today is not the time for hand-wringing and apportioning blame; that is yet to come. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, now is the time to take urgent action to maintain the security cordon around the military side of Kabul airport. I am delighted that the Defence Secretary is in his place and will be able to reassure colleagues that the efforts of the British armed forces currently there are focused entirely on that effort.

The Prime Minister's announcement today of a bespoke resettlement scheme for Afghan citizens and their families who helped our armed forces is welcome, but there is an urgent need for it to cover others who have helped British soft power working in the country, including the British Council, charities, contractors and aid agencies.

Daniel Kawczynski

As a Salopian MP and my neighbour, will my right hon. Friend take part of the time left to him to pay tribute to all those Salopians who served in Afghanistan, both in DFID and the armed forces?

Philip Dunne

I am grateful to my neighbour for drawing attention to the fact that, like every Member of this House, all of us with constituencies in Shropshire have constituents who have served in the last 20 years, with many suffering injuries and some, tragically, death.

We have to ask ourselves how the intelligence analysis of the situation failed us so badly. We have known from some time, thanks to experienced voices such as that of General Petraeus, about the criticality of US contractors to maintain the US and Afghan air forces, which were vital to resupply. Once the 18,000 contractors had been withdrawn, the troops on the ground knew that there was no hope of resupply or reinforcement from the air, which was critical to maintain their morale.

Finally, I urge the Foreign Secretary in his winding-up speech to reflect on the impact of this humiliation on the integrated review.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)

Order. I point out gently, again, that if people waiting to speak intervene, they are preventing others from getting in and they should not be surprised if they are moved down any list that may exist. I call Seema Malhotra.

14:37:00

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op)

To leave the Afghan forces to fight the advancing Taliban on their own was a grave mistake. The gross miscalculation by the US was compounded by the failure of our and other Governments to step up. We are watching the takeover of a nation that, over 20 years, has made great progress, particularly for millions of women and girls—progress that came through sacrifices by many brave members of the Afghan forces and our own, as well as those who served in civil ranks. We lost a good friend seven years ago, when Del Singh was killed in a horrific attack by the Taliban at a restaurant in Kabul; he was one of many thousands who have made the ultimate sacrifice to help to bring about peace, stability and nationhood—I repeat: nationhood, which was also part of our responsibility as an international community.

Afghan families in Britain who have suffered tragedy are living a new nightmare and feel betrayed, with many loved ones back home now at risk as the Taliban

take over the police and the state. I thank many for getting in touch with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), including Khalsa Diwan Afghanistan, Guru Nanak Darbar, the All Afghans Protections Organisation, students and NGOs.

As the Taliban take over cities, they move fast to ensure that no one can fight back. They are hunting out and killing young men, and seeking girls as prizes and brides for Taliban fighters. Why do young men cling to the side of a US plane in the hope of escape and fall to their death? It is because they know that otherwise the Taliban will come for them. A terrifying situation faces women at the forefront of progress for women and girls. I have heard directly from a relative of a 16-year-old girl in Kabul who last week was waiting for the results of her equivalent of GCSEs and about a possible scholarship. Her words yesterday were, "If the Taliban come for me, I'm ready to hang myself."

We must also ensure the evacuation of minority communities, including Sikhs and Hindus, from Afghanistan. I know, and the Government know, that they are at risk and they must be a priority for evacuation. Those in our system must be allowed to stay. We must ensure the safety of Afghans working for the UN and UK aid programmes, particularly women. Those not eligible for UK visas via ARAP, because they are not directly employed, must be allowed to come to the UK. Suppliers of equipment or services to the UK forces in Afghanistan are also being sought out.

Speed is of the essence. Women and girls are burning their employment papers and education certificates before the Taliban come to their homes. Administration must not be delayed. Resources need to be found and applications processed urgently. Finally, there should be safety for those who have no means to flee; they must not be forgotten.

We must stand with the Afghan people. We have a responsibility to lead, and the Afghan people need to hear our voice. We have choices that we, as a nation, can make. If ever there was a time to prove what global Britain means, it is now.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)

Before I call the next speaker, may I just say I think it is quite important that people listen to other contributions? There is quite a lot of chatting going on, which is quite distracting to people.

14:40:00

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con)

Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is rather a shock to be called so early in the debate.

As we sit here talking today, thousands of men and women are frightened for their lives and those of their families—thousands of men and women who believed us, and indeed the entire west, when, in October 2001, in the dark shadow of that awful day in the previous month, we were engaging in Afghanistan, in the words of President George W. Bush, to defeat al-Qaeda, to remove the Taliban from power and so that

“the oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies.”

They believed the words of our own Prime Minister, Tony Blair, when he told the US Congress in 2003:

“We are fighting for the inalienable right of humankind, black or white, Christian or not, left, right or a million different—to be free, free to raise a family in love and hope, free to earn a living and be rewarded by your own efforts, free not to bend your knee to any man in fear”.

We have done great things over the past 20 years and our veterans can be incredibly proud of the good that they achieved in Afghanistan, but these words must sound very hollow to the men, women and children huddled in the airport in Kabul at this moment. Just about every MP in this place is, I am sure, in some way involved in trying to get people out of that country. Among them is a man whose name I will not share, for obvious reasons—a man who worked for the British Government, who has certificates and commendations from the Coldstream Guards and the Royal Air Force and a certificate thanking him for his service in the year of Her Majesty’s the Queen’s diamond jubilee. He believed in us—in us and the American mission. He believed in our mission to rebuild Afghanistan after half a century of bloodshed.

Right now, that man is sitting with his entire family in the airport in Kabul—he, his wife and four children and his 73-year-old mother. His wife, his kids and he were offered safe passage out of the country, but he was told that his elderly and vulnerable mother would not be allowed to travel with them. Late on Monday

night he had to make a choice—to leave with his wife and children and leave his ageing and vulnerable mother behind to whatever fate might befall her, or stay behind. He took the terribly difficult decision to stay. The last I heard was that he was still assisting British troops at the airport and, with the help of the charity that his brother works for, was reapplying for ARAP status for his entire family. This man was only in the airport because he was assisting British nationals to evacuate the country. I have the highest admiration for our amazing men and women in the FCDO and the MOD. These have been incredibly trying times. They have all the details of that case and I know that they are working hard to get that family out. But I will not stop trying to assist that man, as I know many Members of Parliament are doing for many others.

In the last few days belief in the west has been shaken, but it has not died. In America, and here in the UK, not least in our excellent Secretary of State for Defence and all his staff, we have seen examples of people who still believe in the good that we in the west can do. We should never forget that.

14:43:00

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)

Twenty years of presence in Afghanistan and I, like many, have known young men and women who gave their youth, their time and their lives to Afghanistan. My friend from university is still there, in the EU mission, trying to sort things out. Another friend, who I had drinks with only last weekend, flew out straight afterwards to help with the chaos. Our minds, of course, are with many of those people, and we hope for their safe return. So I will say nothing that undermines their and many others' hard work and sacrifice, and all the comments that we have heard today in this place.

We will see how bad the Taliban come to be. I am not hopeful and, more importantly, neither are those thousands of people trying to flee. Those images will be scarred on our minds for a long time. But this is our failure to plan, and it should lead us to hang our heads in shame. Even today, my local university's Chevening scholars say that they have not been given their final award letter, so despite reassurances from the Government, they too are unable to get out because they do not have the right paperwork. Others report similar bureaucratic hurdles, with requirements such as biometric passports or paperwork that is just impossible to facilitate in such a short time, meaning that families cannot escape.

The UK will be judged by our actions, not our words—and our actions, I am afraid, are too slow. I just do not understand why we cannot airlift masses of people out, whether that be to Cyprus or to other military bases, and process the paperwork there. Let us get people out and sort out the paperwork and bureaucracy afterwards. Failure to do so may cost people's lives.

The Home Secretary and the Prime Minister say that they do not want informal and irregular routes out for Afghanis, but without a decent legal system and with such bureaucratic hurdles, requiring people to take only formal routes out might either cost their lives or, as the Home Secretary seems to be suggesting, criminalise them for travelling over informally through the channel or other routes. That is a shameful position for the Government that must surely be reversed, as must the Nationality and Borders Bill.

In 20 years, much might have improved, but let us be clear: our nation building failed. We propped up one of the most corrupt Governments and one of the least free countries in the world, according to corruption indices. Although things might get much worse, we must not celebrate our actions, because they were strategically a failure.

14:46:00

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)

I pay tribute to all the British troops, people from the Department for International Development, the teachers, the doctors and the technicians from Britain who have so courageously worked in Afghanistan, but I disagree with some of the criticism of the Government that I have heard during this debate. Our country found itself in an impossible situation as the second largest contributor in terms of boots on the ground and resources in Afghanistan. When America decided to pull out, I would argue that for us to remain there when so many of our European NATO partners were not prepared to put in adequate resources on the ground was made untenable.

We have to ask ourselves a critical question: of the European countries that are part of the exclusive club of 30 NATO partners, why have so many failed to support the Americans and the British in the extremely important theatre of operations in Afghanistan? There are one or two exceptions that have sent a lot of troops—the country of my birth, Poland, is one—but I will be asking parliamentary questions about why so many European NATO countries did not put adequate resources into that theatre. We heard from the Prime Minister that 98% of all the equipment on

the ground in Afghanistan came from the United States of America. It is not surprising that American patience is running out when so many European allies have refused to give the support required.

We also need to ask questions about the role of Russia and Pakistan and the allegations that they have been supporting the Taliban. Most concerning of all is Pakistan, a country to which we send a great deal of British taxpayers' money in international aid. There are serious questions to be asked about the role of Pakistan and her security forces.

Lastly, I am very proud that the United Kingdom will be taking large numbers of Afghan refugees, but we should also be very proud of the role that we played in helping Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. Britain spent more money than any other European country on providing a safe haven for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan and in the neighbourhood so that those people could one day return to their country. It is so important to work with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and other reasonably stable countries in the region to ensure that Afghans are given protection in their neighbourhood.

14:49:00

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab)

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me in this important debate. I pay tribute to all those who have served our country in Afghanistan, and I am especially thinking of those I know from my constituency in the Wirral. I also thank all those who have written to me in recent days.

Many in this House have spoken about the horrendous human rights abuses in Afghanistan, and I will not repeat what they said. I believe that these events are a huge test of our values, and it is that that I want to talk about.

I accept that in this debate there are Members who do not share the simple principle, as explained by the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), that Afghanistan is a piece of the main. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) spoke about that. A view is held that the protection of the basic rights of those in other countries, absent a direct threat to us, is not worth any increased risk to western armed forces personnel. That view underpins the events that we now see.

But there are many of us in this House who think that we live in one moral universe, and that the question is not whether a moral duty to protect innocent Afghans exists but rather whether it can be practically fulfilled. For those of us who think that Donne was right to say that any person's death diminishes us all, the question is: how do we now respond when the current events in Afghanistan are straightforwardly a denial of the moral duty to protect? One answer has been provided by those on the Government Front Bench—they are not currently here—who, facing this grave moral trauma, went on holiday. A very different answer in the long term is to fix the fundamental flaws in the FCDO that got us here. What is more, we can reverse the loss of the Department for International Development and the aid cuts, and listen when the likes of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Early Warning Project shows red flags for atrocities in Afghanistan and elsewhere. The responsibility to protect still exists.

Finally, on refugees, putting atrocity prevention aside, there is a clear moral duty for the UK Government to act now. Many Members have said what that should look like—it includes expanding family reunion. I regret very deeply the focus on numbers when the focus should be on time. Get people out quickly, and once they are here do not make them wait to restart their lives. The worst conversations I had during covid were with Syrian doctors who were desperate to serve our country. Let us give people their lives back quickly.

14:52:00

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con)

Make no mistake: the British people are shocked at what they are seeing in Afghanistan today. After 20 years of British and American involvement, this is not the outcome we expected. Our presence in Afghanistan may not have continued indefinitely, but it needed to be handled in the right way. It has not been, and President Biden must be held to account for his actions.

My thoughts and prayers are with the British servicemen who lost their lives attempting to bring freedom and democracy to the Afghan people and all those who have been left with life-changing injuries. Their sacrifices must not be in vain. I also weep for the people of Afghanistan, who now face the brutal regime of the Taliban, which has shown no regard for human rights. Many innocent people will now undoubtedly be murdered, with many more suffering unimaginable treatment at the hands of that regime. This is indeed a sad day for humanity.

I visited Afghanistan in 2010 with the Foreign Affairs Committee, and met our troops and visited political leaders in Kabul and Lashkar Gah, including the then President Karzai. I was struck by how much progress was being made to turn that country into a better place as the people were given the opportunity, for once, to live in a free society. My heart goes out to all the good people of that country, who deserve better than the cruel ideology of the Taliban.

We must remember why we entered this conflict after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. The original mission was to defeat al-Qaeda, and that was achieved. The terrorist bin Laden and his criminal gang were obliterated, and rightly so. Today we must honour Her Majesty's armed forces who fought to make the world safer by going to Afghanistan and achieving that objective, but I believe that the UK now has a moral duty to provide refuge and safety for those who are fleeing for their lives. We must assist them swiftly in leaving Afghanistan, and give safe passage to all those who are at risk because of their work with the British and allied forces. We must do everything we can, even as a staging post before they can be settled in third countries. All countries must play their part in helping to accommodate Afghans who cannot return to Afghanistan. Britain must fulfil its moral duty, but the global community must do so as well.

14:55:00

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab)

The Prime Minister said that the fall of the Afghan regime to the Taliban was inevitable. The Foreign Secretary said that he was shocked by the speed at which it occurred. If the Foreign Secretary is correct, I agree with the right hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) that a huge, spectacular failure in intelligence needs to be examined.

The shambolic collapse we have seen, predicted by the Prime Minister, was not inevitable, but I do agree with the right hon. Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who said that that when we withdrew air, logistic and intelligence support, it was inevitable. I raised this with the Prime Minister on 8 July, when he said:

“It is not open ... to the Taliban to enforce a military solution, but neither is it open to us”.—[Official Report, 8 July 2021; Vol. 698, c. 1117.]

How wrong he was.

The Government talk in rhetoric and slogans. Global Britain has been shown to be the hollow slogan that it is.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con)

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the statement on 8 July. Does he accept that this Government's decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan was not opposed in that debate by the Scottish National party or the Opposition? Indeed, it was welcomed by the shadow Foreign Secretary. Is it not right to put that on record? This was effectively a decision of the majority of the House.

Mr Jones

Yes, but the hon. Gentleman's party is in government. It is the Government who take decisions, and the categorical decision to take air power out was a fundamental mistake.

We also need to say loud and clear that we are in a country that is proud of our tradition of allowing sanctuary for those fleeing violence and persecution. It is vital that we step up to the mark and give sanctuary to all those who have helped us throughout our time in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan now faces an uncertain future and a humanitarian crisis. As the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, there is a potential security crisis for us if terrorism is not thwarted there in the future. The clear question to be asked is, was it all worth it? I first visited Afghanistan in 2003, and up until 2010 I visited on six occasions. I went right up the north into Mazar-i-Sharif and right down to Garmsir on the fishhook near the Pakistan border. I saw real progress. Girls' education has been talked about, but there was education for boys as well. There were schools, hospitals and economic development.

Did we make mistakes? Yes, we did. Corruption was endemic. I know that it was raised each of the three times I met President Karzai, and he just batted it aside. It was endemic and toxic for that regime.

Where do we go now? The Foreign Secretary is saying that the options are sanctions on the Taliban or restricting overseas aid. I am sorry, but that is naive and stupid. We need to engage with regional powers. I accept what my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said about Pakistan. We need to engage with Pakistan, but we also need to be ruthless, because it has been a harbourer of the Taliban for the past 20 years. Will we have

to take unpalatable decisions and speak to people we have not spoken to before? Yes, we will, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) said.

I would like to finish by saying this. I was a Minister in the Ministry of Defence. I had the privilege of working with some great and fantastic people who died in Afghanistan, and with others who were maimed in Afghanistan. They are the finest people we have in this country. We cannot change the past, but we can dictate the future, and that future has to be one that ensures that the people of Afghanistan have a future. That is the debt we have to them. It is also the debt we have to those who lost their lives and those who sacrificed so much on our behalf.

15:00:00

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con)

We are leaving Afghanistan. We can debate why we are leaving, and indeed whether we should be, but for now I want to focus on the here and now—what we need to be doing right now.

First up, we need to secure Kabul airfield. We need to prevent those scenes that we saw at the weekend of civilians falling from aircraft undercarriages. We need to allow for the orderly and, hopefully, safe evacuation of UK nationals, Afghan interpreters and Afghans whose support roles have put them in danger. I thank the Defence Secretary for his quick action on that in deploying 900 British troops who, alongside US troops, have helped to secure the airfield and allow for that orderly evacuation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) highlighted, we also need to evacuate the team from the Nowzad dogs charity, which was created by Pen Farthing, a former Royal Marines commando.

We also need to put in place a resettlement plan to help women and girls, and those who face immediate danger from the Taliban. Again, the Government have taken quick action on that, and I welcome the announcement this morning by the Home Secretary that we will be resettling 20,000 Afghans back to the UK. We need to put pressure on the Taliban to retain the freedoms of all the people of Afghanistan, but especially women and girls. As the Prime Minister said at the start of the debate, we will judge the Taliban on their actions, not just their words. I had an email overnight from a constituent who has family over in Afghanistan, in a place called Herat. They are in hiding, and they have just been told that this Friday, in Herat sports centre, the Taliban will be chopping off the hands of some local people. We must watch the actions of the Taliban and not just listen to their words.

Finally, as a former RAF serviceman who served not in Afghanistan, but on the no-fly zone over northern Iraq, I know that we need to reassure our veterans—those who bear the physical and mental scars—and the families of those who died in Afghanistan that we care and that their achievements were not in vain.

Our forces fundamentally weakened the terrorist threat. There has been education in Afghanistan for 20 years. That most definitely sowed the seeds for a better future for Afghanistan, but it came at huge cost. I lost in my constituency Private Thomas Wroe, Lance Corporal Graham Shaw, Captain Lisa Head from Huddersfield, Corporal Jake Hartley, Private Anthony Frampton and Private Daniel Wilford. Those families and our veterans have heard us loud and clear today. We do care, and we care for Afghanistan.

15:03:00

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab)

We have all seen the footage—the shocking images of Afghan cities that now look like the wild west, with huge guns slung casually over every shoulder, shots ringing out in warning and an unmistakable exploding threat. As we watch on in disbelief, our sense of helplessness and impotence grows by the hour. The situation in Afghanistan is one that very few in this House can really imagine, but the few among us who have served there have told us exactly what is going on in several incredibly moving speeches.

It is fundamentally our duty to exhaust every possible avenue, make every possible effort and do all in our power to help those in need. We are all they have. We are safe and free, and we must offer that safety and freedom to those at risk of losing theirs. So what should we do? What are the people of Britain, as well as those experienced NGOs and current and former service personnel, telling us to do? The message is loud and clear: we must offer safe routes out, and we must offer asylum—no ifs or buts.

It is deeply disturbing that the rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls are under serious threat. Just over a quarter of the democratically elected MPs in Afghanistan's House of the People were women, but it appears that no women at all are now represented by the new all-male regime. Men with guns promising that women may still be allowed to work and access education, with many caveats, will undoubtedly set off alarm bells for the women journalists,

teachers, business owners, NGO workers, doctors, artists, politicians and judges who all face much uncertainty in the coming months.

Many women here are angry, extremely worried and determined to fight for the rights of our Afghan sisters. I have been inundated with messages and emails from people who want to help. The Government must listen and assure all of them and all of us that they are carrying out the will of the majority of the British people. In my constituency, our excellent Kent Refugee Action Network, as part of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, has laid out what is needed. They are asking questions that they need urgent answers to relating to family reunion and the mental health of young people from Afghanistan, which has already been severely impacted. What happens to those who are in the UK who have been previously refused asylum because Kabul was considered safe? Can their cases now be considered urgently? Will local authorities, especially those in Kent, receive sufficient financial support to house asylum seekers in suitable accommodation?

I make one final plea to the Government: listen to our constituents, to our NGOs, to feminist activists such as Sophie Walker and her change.org petition, which has now reached 200,000 people signing—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)

Order. I am sorry, Rosie.

03:06:00

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con)

I am proud to represent South West Hertfordshire, which has Northwood NATO base in its constituency borders. Like many colleagues here today, I have been shocked to see the speed with which the Taliban have taken control of Afghanistan in the last week. It is absolutely the right decision that we return to Parliament today to debate the events taking place there.

Many colleagues have spoken in remembrance of those who lost their lives, including the 457 UK military personnel over the last two decades, and I echo their comments and pay tribute to all our military personnel who have served this country bravely and selflessly throughout the conflict. I have met and worked with several Afghan veterans and my thoughts are with them today. I hope they are proud of the work that they have done to improve the lives of many people in Afghanistan, particularly vulnerable women and girls.

The fall of the Afghan Government to the Taliban is not what anyone had hoped would happen once the time came for NATO troops to return from Afghanistan, but that absolutely does not mean that the last two decades have gone to waste. UK military personnel have worked hard to support the new governance structures and institutions that will be crucial to building a more democratic society in Afghanistan and we should be proud of that record. We have provided over £3.3 billion of aid since 2001, with notable improvements in the participation of girls in education and political representation for women. It is essential that that progress is maintained, and I fully support the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary that we should use all the policy tools at our disposal to ensure that the Taliban do not undo that progress. I can only hope that the Taliban stand by their comments made in yesterday's video conference that they will allow women and girls to continue to receive both basic and higher education, even if their previous record gives little room for optimism on that. Education is a human right and no one should be denied an education based on their gender.

We must also make sure that we stand by all those who have helped us throughout this conflict, and I commend the Government for their comments that a new settlement scheme for those most at need, especially women and girls, will be introduced. The Home Office is working hard with international partners on getting as many of these people as it can out safely, and I was glad to hear, as of Monday evening, that over 3,300 Afghan staff and their families have already been evacuated. This needs to be balanced with the requirement of ensuring that we do not import those who do not share our values, and we must keep UK residents safe.

I will leave it at that, Mr Deputy Speaker; thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak.

15:09:00

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)

If I am honest, I feel ashamed today—more ashamed than I can remember in any foreign policy debate in my 20 years in this House. We have seen the most sudden and catastrophic collapse of a foreign and military policy objective of this United Kingdom since Suez, and arguably further back than that. We have managed to humiliate ourselves. We have shamed our politics and our way of doing business. We have trailed the British flag and, frankly, our own honour in the dirt and the

mud. Global Britain has been exposed as a meaningless slogan—a boast without a strategy behind it.

I am ashamed, too, by how we have treated many of our armed forces over these 20 years. It is shocking to me that there are still soldiers who were diagnosed with PTSD when they actually had a brain injury due to an explosion. We are one of the few countries that still does not test any of our armed forces automatically after an explosion for a brain injury, and that may be one of the reasons why many of them later suffer from dementia and depression.

I am ashamed that we never said to the United States of America last year or this year, “Hang on. Stop, think, wait, and put in place a proper plan before you go ahead with this.” I am ashamed that our silence basically endorsed Trump’s plan last year and that our silence now, apart from one notable exception in the form of the Secretary of State for Defence, has effectively enabled Biden to get away with some of the most shameful comments ever from an American President. We should never be just a sidekick to the United States of America in our foreign policy or military policy.

I am fearful, of course, for the women and children, but also, particularly out of a personal interest, for the gay men in Afghanistan. It has not exactly been a walk in the park for them over the past 20 years, but now they know that they will be exterminated. Sharia judges are already saying what they will do. There are two ways of dealing with a homosexual man in Afghanistan: one is stoning, and the other is putting them behind a wall that is then toppled on top of them and kills them.

I am fearful for the children who will grow up in violence or in a refugee camp, fearful for all the thousands who will do whatever they possibly can to get to a place of safety, and fearful that we will not have a proper programme in place in this country to greet people and that some of them will end up going to jail because we are introducing laws that will make things even more difficult for them. To be honest, I am angry with the Government. I am angry in particular with the Prime Minister. I just do not think that he has paid enough attention to this issue. I do not think that he was courageous enough in what he said to the American President either last year or this year, and he should be ashamed of himself.

15:12:00

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con)

I pay tribute to the armed forces, especially those who reside in my constituency of Wealden. I also want to take a moment to pay tribute to all those Afghan men and women who were brutalised for 17 years under the Taliban, did everything that they could to rebuild their country, and once again will have to face a Taliban without us by their side.

There are many who have served in Afghanistan on these Benches. I had a very brief moment in Kabul. For 17 years under the Taliban, no female voice was heard in the Afghan Parliament, the Loya Jirga. I worked for the BBC World Service and we rounded up some very brave women to make sure that female voices were heard for the first time in the Loya Jirga. We did that under the threat of the Taliban, but I had a British passport, and I knew that I could come home and be safe. I was naively optimistic in thinking that these women's lives would be improved for the better. I am now receiving phone calls telling me that it is game over.

It has taken 20 years to have 69 female MPs and they will watch us speak here today knowing what will happen if we cannot get them out, and soon. They cannot wait for five years. It is not just them, but their families, everyone who has worked with them, and everyone in an NGO who has worked to un-Talibanise the laws and processes in Afghanistan who are now targeted. It means that, after 20 years, we will have to start all over again. This has been catastrophic, cack-handed, cruel and humiliating. This is the watershed moment of the west's failure.

I want to say two very quick things, hopefully to try to be constructive. I need to understand how our intelligence has failed, how the imagination of those providing the intelligence has failed, and, if we are relying on this intelligence now going forward, how we can be assured that they know to do the right thing, whether it is in relation to our regional partners, the Taliban or any further security issue. I would like to have a better understanding of where our parameters are when it comes to dealing with the Taliban, of what leverage we have to ensure safe passage, and of whether any aid funding will reach the people whom it needs to get to.

My final point is about the radicalisation that is going to emerge from Afghanistan. There will be not just the extremism that the Taliban will promote, but a fight in the middle east and Asia about who represents Islam. Members may not agree

with me, but some countries have been trying to become more liberal since 9/11 to take away the taint around Islam. Will they now have to become even more conservative and brutal to compete with the Taliban? That will bring forward a new version of extremism where we cannot rely on any safety and security for women in the middle east or in any Islamic state.

Finally, may I ask anybody listening—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)

Order. Sorry, but more than half the people are not going to get in—I do apologise. I call Layla Moran.

15:15:00

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)

The appalling scenes that we have witnessed over the last few days will certainly outlive us all, but equally moving are the accounts on the ground that I am sure we have all heard. The brother of my neighbour, Assad, is a Hazara, one of the most persecuted minority communities in Afghanistan. He has not left the house in weeks, not because of covid, but because of fear—already—of being killed, and he is one of millions. We must not be fooled. Despite what the Taliban say, they do not mean it. My good friend Nemat, an Afghan academic who is luckily now in Australia, said to me, “The Taliban are professional liars”. Behind their empty promises and their weasel words lies a devastating reality, and shame on us for believing them twice.

This Government must do all they can to ensure that people have an escape route. The airport in Kabul seems to be working, but what of those who cannot get there? What about those who cannot get to Kabul itself at all? That is why the Liberal Democrats have been calling for a safe corridor. We must utilise every diplomatic tool available. I note that in his opening remarks, the Prime Minister said that he had spoken to Prime Minister Khan. Did he raise this? We know that the Inter-Services Intelligence has been providing support for the Taliban for some time. We have leverage with Pakistan, and Pakistan has leverage with them. Was that even broached?

On the refugees that we are to take in, 20,000 sounds good, but we have had 20 years of involvement. If we take the 5,000 and break it down by constituency, that is seven per constituency. For 20,000, it is 30 per constituency. Surely we can do better than that? That should be a starting point, not a target. When they come,

we need to recognise that councils need to be well funded in providing services such as housing, education, language provision, and mental health support—all that must be part of what is provided.

For my very final remarks, on women and girls, I hand my voice to a woman on the ground. She said:

“Like every other woman I have been staying home and am afraid to go out. Women are not allowed to leave their homes without a government official ... Their safety, hopes, dreams have to be locked once again, we just live to exist, nothing else.”

Imagine what that must be like. Imagine the pictures of young girls being posted on social media as spoils of war, to be married off to the fighters.

Daisy Cooper

In times of crisis, the voices of women are often missing. Does my hon. Friend agree that whatever the UK Government and the international community do next, the protection of the rights of Afghan women and girls must be put front and centre?

Layla Moran

I thank my hon. Friend and agree with her wholeheartedly. As well as those who are facing imminent death, anyone whose life is put at risk—particularly if they have helped us in our aid projects, our military and our civil society efforts—must be protected.

Trump may have loaded this particular gun, and Biden may well have pulled the trigger, but our Prime Minister stood by and watched while they did it, powerless and weak. He is complicit by his impotence. This Government must live up to that failure, make good on their former promises, and allow all those who need refuge into our country.

15:19:00

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con)

I will keep my comments brief as I am aware that many Members wish to have their voices heard on this topic.

Over the past few days, I have been contacted by many of my constituents regarding the current atrocities unfolding in Afghanistan. They have shared with me their growing worries and concerns for the people of Afghanistan, many of which I share—issues such as the lives of ordinary citizens, the future of women and girls, which was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), among others, and the recent UNICEF report on violence against children.

I am saddened by the ongoing reports coming from Afghanistan, and I would like assurances from the Government that we will do all we can to help both British citizens in Afghanistan and Afghan nationals. Yesterday, I was contacted by a constituent who is rightly concerned about their family who live in Kabul. Like so many others, they are looking for assurances. Broxtowe's own 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group, based at Chetwynd barracks, has a small team that has already contributed hugely to the ongoing effort in Afghanistan, and I send them my heartfelt thanks for what they are doing.

It is my belief that the situation must be addressed with an international effort as soon as possible. My constituents and I ask the Government to lay out urgently their plans to work with other world leaders to assist the citizens of Afghanistan.

15:21:00

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab)

The recurring feature of the organisations and terror groups we have been battling for more than 20 years, apart from their obvious barbarity, is their attitude to women. It is not about religion or cultural difference, but about human rights. I believe we have been right to oppose them and to fight for people's human rights, but we have paid a high price; I will not forget my visits to the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine at Selly Oak and meeting so many of our troops who were treated there. Their bravery, and the hope they brought, should never be forgotten.

It has not been at all easy, but until last week Afghanistan was a place where girls went to school and where women were in government, the civil service and the judiciary. The outcome was probably inevitable from the moment President Trump promised he could end the war. I am not surprised that the Taliban outmanoeuvred him and played him for the fool he was, but, like many in our country, I am astonished that our Government apparently did not see it coming.

There are those who will say, “It wasn’t worth it. It wasn’t our fight.” It was worth it to all those women who enjoyed the freedom and opportunities that our intervention brought them. It is always worth it to stand against evil. Afghanistan’s fate is once again in the hands of the Taliban, but we can redeem ourselves slightly by doing right by those who have helped our troops and by assisting obviously genuine refugees. It is time to honour our obligations to those to whom we owe this debt.

Earlier, I heard about a family, with constituency connections to Selly Oak, whose police officer father was killed in Badakhshan, which I think is the furthest north-eastern province. They are asking, “How do we get his four girls and their aunt out?” Birmingham is a city with a proud history of helping refugees, and we stand ready to play our part again. We cannot have any backsliding or sleight of hand from the Prime Minister or the Home Secretary on that commitment.

I hope we will learn one further simple truth from this: we cannot do deals with extremists. Our Foreign Secretary would do well to remember that as he considers future demands from Iran.

15:23:00

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con)

The US surrender of its wardship of a problem child is a monumental failure of statecraft, geopolitical confidence and strategic patience that has been made all the worse by the fact that it spans two Administrations. The US is diminished by this, but so are all of us in the free world. The winners are those who are lined up against us and against our values. The losers, from Taiwan to the Caucasus, are those who will see their champions as having feet of clay.

We are left with a looming sense of foreboding at this ignominious end of the fourth Afghan war. It seems very likely that murderous civil war and the mother of all refugee crises will ensue, and it seems to many of us that the geopolitical plates are shifting—and they are shifting against us.

But the past 20 years have not been for nothing. Shout it from the rooftops! Four hundred and fifty-seven men and women demand it; their families demand it; and hundreds and thousands of our countrymen and countrywomen who are damaged in mind and body demand it. Twenty years of fundamentalist terror has been denied a power base, degrading its exportability to our streets. Twenty years

of progress in Afghanistan cannot be erased by the brutes now in charge. They are 20 years in which the Taliban and its associates have not destabilised a fragile neighbourhood, and in which the export of opiates has been cut, to the benefit of our streets, and 20 years of Afghan dreams of a better life that will not be undreamt.

What now? What mitigation? Who will step up where the US has stepped back? Who will lead? Who will be the convener? Who will hold the pen? It must be Britain. Four hundred and fifty-seven British dead demand it. The Prime Minister has taken an early lead. I would expect nothing else, and this House must get behind him.

15:26:00

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)

Today is a tragic and shameful day for western Governments. But I also think that it is a day on which we have seen Parliament at its best. We have heard some wonderful speeches and the debate has been illuminated in particular by those who have served. I will long remember the speeches by the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). Their evidence is particularly powerful because of the lives they have led and the experiences they have had.

As others have said, we must learn the lessons from the last 20 years, but that does not mean that we should never intervene or seek to make things better. The truth is that our intervention did make us safer and it also improved the lives and prospects of many in Afghanistan. I fear that we may learn the wrong lessons. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) spoke powerfully about the many benefits that the people of Afghanistan gained as a result of our intervention, but she then said that she voted against it 20 years ago because she thought that this is where we would end up. Even with my fury at the actions of President Biden, of President Trump before him and of the British Government, I do not believe that we should say that the previous 20 years were wasted as a result of where we are today.

Others have said that the Taliban will be judged not on what they say but on what they do, but given our current circumstances, in what way will we judge them? They see that we have walked away, so for us to stand here in this place and say that we will judge them on the basis of their actions seems like weasel words, I am afraid. It is disgraceful that the Foreign Secretary chose to go on holiday as the

Taliban marched into Afghanistan and towards the gates of Kabul. I fear that the west's withdrawal will not save us money in the end and will not make us safer. I fear that we will look back on this day in a few months and say that we were in a position to continue to support Afghanistan, with a very small presence, on its road to a better future.

Almost 70 years on, there are still 28,000 American soldiers in Korea. People say that 20 years on we should not still need to be in Afghanistan, but sometimes a small presence can make a huge difference. Although we absolutely should thank every single person who has served in Afghanistan, we should also recognise that their contribution and the people they fought alongside played a huge part in making us safer and Afghanistan better.

15:29:00

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con)

In 2007, the then Labour Government sent a small cross-party group of Members of Parliament to Afghanistan, and I was one of them. We were in Lashkar Gah when a group of our soldiers came back, having lost one of their number, and we could see that the psychological stress on those soldiers was immense. I say to the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who is on the Front Bench today, "Please, do all you can to support our veterans at what is bound to be a really difficult time for them."

We need to look at the short term and the long term in Afghanistan. In the short term, we need to get all the western people with passports out, we need to get out all whose lives are put at risk by their association with the British and the Americans, and we need to facilitate the resettlement of any refugees as quickly as possible.

In the medium and longer term, the British need to play a real part. We need a big diplomatic effort. The Prime Minister's announcement today that he will lead a G7 meeting is of primary importance, but it is also important that we become realigned with our closest and largest ally, the United States, so that we again operate from the same page. We need to look at the UN and see what we can do on the Security Council to try to persuade the Chinese and the Russians not to use Afghanistan for their own narrow sectoral interests. We need to look at the frontline states—at countries such as Pakistan—to see how they have dealt with harbouring the Taliban and how they will move forward in dealing with refugees, perhaps through their onward transmission to further safe havens.

This is a dark day for Afghanistan. We will look at the Taliban and judge them by their actions, but I say to the British Government, “Please, start talking to the Taliban to see where there is interest so that we can influence those people and their behaviour.” Otherwise, if the Taliban start doing extremist things in Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance, which we went in largely to help, will re-emerge and a vicious civil war will break out in Afghanistan. That will make the whole thing far worse.

Where Britain does not lead with its values of democracy, tolerance, a good judicial system and a free press, whether in Afghanistan or elsewhere, the world is a poorer and nastier place. We owe it to the Afghans to redouble our diplomatic efforts in the weeks, months and years ahead to see what we can do to salvage a more sustainable future for Afghanistan.

15:32:00

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP)

The humanitarian disaster unfolding in front of our eyes is a political failure rather than a military one, and I think it is important that this House recognises that. The work of our armed forces who were sent into Afghanistan to achieve what many believed at the time was a near-impossible, and certainly dangerously idealistic, ambition prevailed in military terms. I was working in the MOD in 2001 just before military operations in Afghanistan got under way. At a meeting of the MOD and industry in Yeovil, I recall clearly the universal incredulity at the idea that this intervention in a theatre that had previously humbled both the British and the Soviet Union could ever conceivably end well—and so it has come to pass.

The media reported last week the unbelievable pace with which the Taliban advanced across the country, but why was that such a shock? Perhaps the Government can explain why they were so ill prepared. Many observers, myself included, do not think for one minute that there was a failure of military intelligence; rather, we think that there was a failure of Ministers to act on it. This House and the public at large need to know whether civilian officials and intelligence analysts are at liberty to convey difficult and unwelcome messages to senior Ministers in this Government, and that those same Ministers will act in the national interest rather than on any more expedient or transient priority.

Can the Government tell the veterans and their families in Angus and across these islands what this was all for—not the intention or the ambition of the dedicated

and successful military operations, but the outcome and the consequences? What is the legacy of those people's bravery, sacrifice and loss? I want to highlight to the Defence Secretary the correspondence I have received from my constituent, a former company commander in 2011 in Operation Herrick.

He shares the chilling email he got from his former translator—with whom he keeps in touch, such are the bonds forged in combat—and his Afghan friend's plight in trying to exit the country through the UK embassy with his family. I will send on the details to the Defence Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, who I am sure will both give them dedicated support. Then there are the civilians and NGOs, who endured no small measure of risk and hardship to apply their skills and expertise in the service of Afghanistan and her people. What of their work to build order and systems of just administration, and challenge endemic corruption? What remains of those hard fought gains and of civil society—those brave Afghan souls, many of them women, who stepped into the space that we created for them and took up roles supporting the UK and its allies?

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)
rose—

Dave Doogan

I give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr Perkins

On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You have put in place a three-minute time limit. Every time Members from certain parties get to the end of their speeches, they add on another minute by taking an intervention. Is it not a huge discourtesy to everyone on your list who is going to miss out for them to add on a minute every time they do not think the time limit is long enough?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)

There are a lot of people who are not going to get in—we know that—but under current procedures people can take up to two interventions. Yes, people should take on board the fact that they are possibly doing some of their colleagues out of a turn if that happens, so I hope that the position will not be abused.

Gavin Newlands

I should point out to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) that we are six hours into the debate and this is the second SNP Back-Bench speech on this important issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) mentioned women and girls. The Taliban have said that they are committed to the rights of women. Does he agree with me that these misogynist thugs see women as third-class people and chattels only there to serve men, and that this House cannot believe a word the Taliban say about the rights of women?

Dave Doogan

I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. As many hon. and right hon. Members have observed this afternoon, the Taliban need to be judged on their actions, not on their words.

Against this new reality, it is beyond credibility that the Foreign Secretary has publicly claimed that the UK will hold the Taliban to account. What does that mean? By what means and to what end would this be done? It would suit the Foreign Secretary better to fully restore the foreign aid budget, rather than issuing abstract and random threats to a regime that has just shown the UK the door. Five thousand refugees this year is not commensurate with the scenes in Kabul of people literally running for their lives and clinging to aircraft, and a hazy figure of 20,000, over what period we are not certain, is insubstantial to say the least, given the circumstances.

In closing, I urge the Government and the Prime Minister to review and expedite this element of the UK's response, including through a cogent plan to extricate brave Afghans who are not already in Kabul. The UK was front and centre at the genesis of this political catastrophe. It should be similarly positioned for the clear-up.

15:37:00

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con)

I would like to start by thanking the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) in particular and all other colleagues for the generous remarks they have made today about those of us who had the honour of serving on operations in Afghanistan. I served on Op Herrick 9 in the autumn and winter of 2008-09. My time with 3 Commando Brigade was one of the great privileges of my life. As we discuss the awful situation in Afghanistan and its possible future today, we are also rightly honouring the sacrifice of the 457 of our servicemen and women who made the ultimate sacrifice and the more than 600 who continue to live with life-changing injuries.

To those who say that it was not worth it or has not been a success—thankfully it is a tiny number in the House today—may I gently remind people that the original objective, which was to destroy al-Qaeda on the ground, deprive it of a base from which to mount terrorist attacks throughout the rest of the world, defeat the Taliban and try to keep our own streets safe, was achieved. Our people, the Americans, our allies, and the Afghan army and police force achieved those objectives with honour and courage.

I commend the work done by Defence Equipment and Support at MOD Abbey Wood in my constituency, which provided the logistical support, the equipment, the air bridge and the welfare throughout the entire Afghan operation and continues to do that job on a daily basis for our troops deployed throughout the world, and for the MOD in particular.

Like most of the House, I feel ashamed, angry and devastated by what I have seen happening in Afghanistan in recent days and weeks. I cannot help but keep remembering the ordinary people of Afghanistan and the locally employed civilians who not only risked their lives but, by helping NATO forces, risked the lives of their families, friends and villages to Taliban reprisals. I was delighted and relieved beyond measure when the Prime Minister announced today the resettlement and evacuation programme for refugees, which is a fantastic thing.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who said that we have been let down by our American friends. There was no binary choice between ramping up the operation back to a war-fighting pitch, with the numbers and expense, and abandoning the country. There were other options, and I am amazed by President Biden, who was vice-president when the Americans rushed out of Iraq the first time and saw the consequences when we had to redeploy—we still have British troops in Kurdistan mentoring and training Kurdish forces. There may well be a time when we have to redeploy again.

15:40:00

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab)

I pay tribute to all those who lost their lives serving their country, and to those who have served, especially colleagues on both sides of the House.

I was struck by the words of my first cousin Mark, who served in Afghanistan 18 years ago. Like many of us, he found the scenes unfolding in Afghanistan difficult. His post on social media resonates with many veterans:

“Those poor souls, so fearful of what lay ahead for them that they would rather cling to a jet and fall to their deaths than face the future in their homeland. It’s hard to even comprehend their desperation and fear. 18 years ago I was there: believing in what we were part of; believing that we would make a difference; believing that their futures would be brighter and lives more secure for their loved ones; believing that if I had to make the ultimate sacrifice it would have been worth it; believing it would be alright in the end; believing that Afghan nationals would not succumb to corruption and would realise that they needed to come together and stand strong for what they believed in.”

My cousin has never felt as totally confused as he does now, which concerns me. Some of his colleagues made the ultimate sacrifice, and more so their surviving families back home. His Afghan medals mean nothing to him any more. He does not feel proud; he feels totally repulsed. He cannot think of a worse Government than the present one. He feels they have failed miserably, not just on the Covid-19 pandemic but on how they have let the situation get to where it is. His words:

“My medal is now a memento of a failed mission.”

I would like to say that I am very proud of my cousin for his service, and so are his sisters, his wife, his daughters and his cousins like me.

The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) paid tribute to the veterans who served by saying that it is the politicians and the foreign policy that have let them down. I have to agree. For my cousin Mark, and for all those who served, we now need to know how the Government and the Prime Minister will address the despair and hopelessness felt by so many veterans. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the leader of the Labour party, said today, recent events in Afghanistan shame the west.

15:43:00

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con)

In preparation for today's debate, I put out an all-stations call to my constituents to establish their opinions. By Jove, they have many questions about what has happened.

Today, we need to focus on what we do next. We must do all we can to assist those Afghan people who supported the British effort and who are now at risk of retribution, namely the thousands of interpreters still waiting to leave. It would be optimistic to assume that the air bridge will remain open much longer. I urge the Government, as others have, to ramp up the substantial efforts already being made to maximise this brief window of opportunity. I, too, commend the Secretary of State for Defence for his tireless work over the past few days. However, despite the need for expedience, we must ensure that our national and border security is upheld and prepare for an influx of refugees. These are areas of concern to my constituents.

The Defence Committee has just undertaken an inquiry into the experiences of women in the military and of female veterans. It saddens me immensely that we will now see the re-emergence of the oppression of Afghan women, nowhere more so than the oppression of women upholding democracy in the military, media and Parliament. I urge the Government to consider them with preference in the citizens' resettlement scheme. I have been talking to many fellow veterans, as we all have, and unilaterally they hold a deep and fresh grief for the loss of service lives in Afghanistan. I want to reassure them that for those who served and made that sacrifice, that meant that terrorists were denied the ability to launch attacks on and in Britain, and for that we are eternally grateful.

Of the 457 service personnel who were killed, 32 were from Wales, including Guardsman Shadrake from Wrexham—the anniversary of his death was yesterday. Two thousand, two hundred were physically wounded, and countless are left with mental scars. We must do all that we can as a society and as a Parliament to support those people. Finally, I would like to name the four service personnel from my old corps, the Intelligence Corps, who made the ultimate sacrifice: Sarah Bryant, James Brynin, Jabron Hashmi and Oliver Thomas.

15:46:00

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab)

It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton). I echo her tribute to her four colleagues and, indeed, I will pay my own tribute to armed forces personnel later in my speech.

I appreciate that time is brief, so I want to address the key points and raise three issues. First, I thank colleagues across the House for the generous and sensible way in which we have debated these important matters with one another, and I associate myself with the remarks by the Leader of the Opposition, by the former Prime Minister, and by the Chairs of the Select Committees on Defence and on Foreign Affairs and, indeed, by colleagues across the House who served in Afghanistan.

First, I pay tribute to the forces; secondly, I want to highlight some key outstanding humanitarian issues, as other colleagues have done; and, thirdly, I will touch briefly on some of the possible lessons, although we are in the early stages of assessing those. Paying tribute to those who served, I want to make it clear that from my perspective—I believe that this is felt across the House and the country—those who gave their life and paid the ultimate price did not do so in vain. We have had 20 years in which terrorism in Afghanistan has been kept under control. The threat of spectacular attacks on the west such as the twin towers attack has been removed from that country. We now face a new situation that we must address, and I will come on to that.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)

The hon. Gentleman is talking about the threat of terrorism now that the Taliban are back in power. Does he share my concern about the fact that the Taliban are the world's biggest drug cartel, producing 85% of the world's heroin, which is something that will have an impact on our communities, as production is set to soar under their control?

Matt Rodda

I thank the hon. Lady for making that point, and I agree with her concern, which I share deeply.

On the benefits of the 20 years of intervention, it is important to recognise—this has been recognised across the House—the significant benefits in Afghanistan of our commitment to that country, and to consider and reflect on that, as well as

the huge achievements that were made in that time. We should not lose sight of that. It is vital that we support our veterans, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and many other speakers have said. It is crucial that we support them as we go through the next, very difficult phase.

I am grateful for the time I have for this speech, and I shall quickly address the other points I wish to make. Turning to the humanitarian crisis, we were all deeply shocked by the scenes at the airport. I am pleased that the Government have made further commitments today. I would like further detail, and I hope that there will not be any backsliding. It is really important that we live up to our international obligations. As many colleagues have said, we need to find ways of smoothing out and removing unnecessary bureaucracy so that we can live up to our obligations to people who have served this country and key members of civil society who are highly likely targets of the Taliban regime.

Finally, let me turn briefly to the lessons. It is far too early to address them in any detail whatever, but I would like to raise some poignant questions that I hope we can all reflect on. The strategy quite clearly needs to be re-examined, as many other people have mentioned. That is an international matter, but it is also a matter for the British Government as the key ally of the US. We also need to consider the immediate period running up to this crisis and reflect on the management of key Government Departments, and, indeed, the role of Prime Minister at that time.

15:50:00

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)

This has not been the orderly withdrawal that any of us would have wanted. The rapid collapse of the Afghan Government and their armed forces, and the takeover by the Taliban have been more an implosion than a transition. This is not our finest hour. But nor is it our worst humiliation since Suez, for let us not forget that we went in with a UN mandate as NATO and we stopped fighting seven years ago, since when we have been giving support and training to the elected Afghan Government. Our exit is not of our making, but the US Government's. None of those things was true of Suez.

It is important that we recognise that in order to support the great present and future work that will be done by organisations such as NATO's Gloucestershire-headquartered Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, and the individual men and women of armed forces units such as 1 Rifles, which is also based in Gloucestershire, and

their families. They did so much to prevent international terrorism coming out of Afghanistan for two decades. Now we have to focus on the immediate priorities of getting our own citizens out of Afghanistan safely, helping to get out as many of the most vulnerable of those who helped us while we were there and then organising a generous resettlement programme, about which we have heard very good news from the Prime Minister today. The longer-term debate about how we work with different partners across the world, how we work with Islamic states and how we project our values peacefully through organisations such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy must come another day.

In the short term, in order to achieve those three objectives we are going to have to work, however much it grates, with those who are now in power in Afghanistan. Just as we know from recent events that we did not always predict what was going to happen accurately, we should not assume that we know exactly how things will pan out from now. We do not have complete control of the situation, and I believe that we owe to all those at Kabul airport, our diplomats and our armed forces good fortune in managing to extricate ourselves with some honour from this incredibly difficult situation. The future will see a debate that all of us will want to play a part in, but for now let us wish them all good fortune in executing the mission.

15:53:00

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab)

Watching events over the past few days has been like watching a slow-motion horror movie, seeing innocent people fleeing for their lives, the scenes of utter desperation at Kabul airport, and women and girls being airbrushed out, their future uncertain. But this is real life and those scenes will stay with me. I cannot imagine how our armed forces personnel and their families must feel, as well as those who have served in Afghanistan, including many Members here, and the many families who have lost loved ones.

I am horrified: horrified that this Government have not stepped in earlier to do something to prevent this; horrified that they have sat back and watched this situation unfold; and horrified that the Foreign Secretary could sit on a beach in Crete on the day that Kabul fell. This has been a catastrophic failure of western leaders and now we simply get a debate in the House of Commons—no vote and no binding resolution on the Government. We can be in no doubt about this House's views on the Government's actions.

As the Taliban continue to increase their dominance, violence and forced displacement continue to rise. Assurances from the Taliban leadership are not enough; they are words we have heard before. We know they will target those they have always targeted: women and girls, religious minorities, political opponents, journalists and human rights activists. Jihadist groups are celebrating. That is all we need to know.

We should feel ashamed: we are betraying those we promised we would help and leaving people who relied on us at the mercy of their enemy. We must help to provide safe and legal routes and sanctuary for all those in danger, not simply those who were directly employed by the UK Government. Twenty thousand refugees over five years is simply not good enough. I am proud that our Welsh Labour Government have made clear their warm welcome to any refugees and are working with the Home Office to be a nation of sanctuary.

The words “global Britain” are hollow in the face of what we are witnessing. I urge the Government to work with our international partners to face up to our moral duty to offer support and to do something for the women and girls over there who throw away their certificates—their education—because they are scared. Enough smoke and mirrors: now is the time for real action.

15:56:00

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)

This is a shameful episode and a shameful dereliction of policy by the western alliance. There is no getting around that. I pay tribute, as have others, to those who served out there and made a sacrifice—sometimes the ultimate sacrifice. Constituents of mine who served have been in touch with me and are as dismayed at the outcome as I am and so many other Members are.

It is not the prime responsibility of Her Majesty’s Government that this situation has come about—the principal responsibility lies, of course, with the dereliction of two United States Administrations—but, sadly, we are tainted by it. That must cause us to think again about how in future we construct a special relationship that seems to me to be, on a number of issues, lopsided to say the least. What was the level of consultation before the disastrous decision was taken by the Trump Administration? What was the level of communication between us and the Biden Administration to try, at least, to desist?

The Secretary of State for Defence deserves credit for all his efforts, but as we go forward we have to think about rebuilding a fresh approach to the NATO alliance that is less dependent on a United States that, sadly, has clearly set itself upon becoming protectionist and isolationist for the foreseeable future. To do that, we must rebalance NATO, which must involve our building bridges and restoring links with our European allies in NATO. In particular, we must include in that France, the other power with significant forward capability to mount operations elsewhere in the world.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)

Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Robert Neill

Time presses and it would be unfair on others if I did so. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

We must also work with our allies in the Commonwealth that have capacity—countries such as Canada have a long track record in these matters. We must rebalance our strategic approach. We cannot simply be the Little Sir Echo of the United States. The US will always be an important ally for us, but the truth is that it is not Ronald Reagan’s shining city on a hill any more and we have to adjust to that reality.

The other thing we must do is to protect those who helped us in Afghanistan. I referred earlier to women judges; since then I have had emails from other judges’ families as well. Judges, lawyers and prosecutors—part of the attempt to build a civilised society—were already being targeted for assassination even before the Taliban swept into power. They and their families now have to be in hiding. We have to help them.

We took 27,000 people from Uganda when Idi Amin’s dictatorship expelled them, and I am proud that it was a Conservative Government under Edward Heath who did that. The key thing is that we did not set an arbitrary number; we took them on the basis of need and they enriched and enhanced this country. In the same way, we should be as generous in our spirit to those in Afghanistan. I am sure that if the Government reflect on it, they will understand the importance of that, because that is in the British tradition.

15:59:00

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab)

I supported the war in Afghanistan; I supported the war in Iraq. In politics, it is important to learn from your mistakes, but it is often other people who pay for them. Today, this Chamber should debate what has happened in Afghanistan with genuine humility.

There is no point in criticising the Government's strategy; there has not been one. When President Trump announced his decision to withdraw troops last year, our Government should have prepared to relocate all those Afghan families to whom we owed a debt of honour: the interpreters, the medics, the aid workers. They should have; they did not. They should have fast-tracked all the outstanding settlement applications from British citizens wanting to bring their children and partners from Afghanistan. They should have; they did not.

Two days ago, my office phoned the Home Office hotline for MPs to ask what emergency procedures are now in place. My constituent and his three British children are in Kabul, waiting to bring their mother—his wife—to safety in the UK. The Home Office officer said that there was no such procedure and that she must apply “in the normal way”. There is no normal way! There is nowhere to sit the English language test and nowhere to submit biometric data. That was two days ago. Yesterday, we phoned again and she said, “There is something, but it's for internal use only.” Eighteen months on, the Home Secretary has put out one internal memo.

One constituent has three sisters there. I dare not name them: they were key figures in the nation-building programme. They are in hiding, with no man to accompany them to an airport. They should have had information from our Foreign Office weeks ago about how the relocation scheme would operate to keep them safe and bring them to the UK—how we would fulfil our debt of honour to them and to all the interpreters, doctors, journalists and others now in danger. No such information came. That debt of honour has not been fulfilled.

The Afghanistan that we hoped to build 20 years ago may be lost for now, but our Government need a plan and a vision for the sort of world that we want to build. Afghanistan will be how we are judged in future. Are we to be trusted? Do we keep our word? Do we have the will to support the values that we preach? Do we have the foresight to prepare against the things that we fear will happen? Any dispassionate observer of this Government would have to answer no, but this is

not just a political failure. It is a moral failure of which the price is now being paid by others: British citizens with family members trapped in Afghanistan, those who fought and served alongside our own valiant troops, the women, the religious minorities and all those who now face a well-founded fear of persecution.

16:02:00

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con)

Afghanistan has dominated much of my working life, so I am grateful to have been called to speak this afternoon. The situation there is galling, and one can only imagine the horrors that are unfolding in that most challenging part of the world. Were all the blood, sweat, tears and lives lost worth it? Well, now is not the time for an introspective look at how we got where we are today, as our priority is the here and now, but I will raise three quick points, if I may.

First, the fall of Kabul will reopen wounds for our service personnel, our veterans and their families. Huge sacrifices were made by so many, so I express my deepest sympathy to all those who lost loved ones and those with ongoing mental and physical scars. I also pay particular tribute to the 3,487 allied service personnel who lost their lives, including 457 British men and women, many of whom I served with.

There are no winners in war—it is a horrible, dirty business—but I believe that the MOD and the FCDO acted in good faith throughout the conflict. There were significant successes: schools, education, women’s rights, markets, jobs, town centres. People were given hope, and no terrorist acts in the west were orchestrated from Afghanistan’s soil. It may just be that some wars cannot be won, that strategic aims may be too ambitious and that some parts of the world are simply ungovernable.

As for the here and now, the non-combatant evacuation operation is in full flow, but I want to see an enhanced FCDO presence on the ground to ensure that we get it right. We must secure the airhead. We also need to take advantage of the relatively permissive environment—for now—to extend the lines of communication and ensure safe passage for UK nationals and entitled personnel to the airhead. In tactical terms, we need to go ugly early.

In addition, we need to be honest with ourselves. The FCDO must be realistic about the task at hand, not least in its messaging, by not writing cheques that cannot be cashed in terms of offering a safe haven for the non-entitled. I regret

that we need to accept the harsh reality of what is happening in Afghanistan. Whether we like it or not, the overriding imperatives are UK nationals, foreign nationals with whom we have an arrangement and those entitled Afghan personnel we can lift.

Finally, we need to be honest about our place in the world and our global ambitions. The fall of Kabul, like Suez, has shown that the UK may not be able to operate autonomously without US involvement. It may be that our foreign policy is decided as much in Washington as it is in London. I am being provocative, but with so much being spent on defence and with global Britain at the forefront of our foreign policy, just how independent are we?

16:05:00

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab)

First, I put it on record that I have had many emails and messages from my constituents, expressing their distress at the events in Afghanistan, not least in respect of women, girls and LGBT people, as well as their wish that Britain plays a full part in evacuating not just British citizens and Afghans who supported our work, but other Afghan refugees who trusted the promise by western nations to make the Taliban part of their past, not their future. Bristol is a city of sanctuary and we stand ready to assist.

Many urgent and worthy issues have been debated today, but I want to focus on just one point. I fear that events in Afghanistan could be the symbolic end of the period when the UK has been able to exert influence in securing a cohesive western approach in the world. The way in which the withdrawal from Afghanistan took place represented a United States primarily concerned about its own situation, failing to step up and play an important role in the world as a torchbearer of democracy, pursuant to its status as a democratic superpower. It represented a NATO that was hamstrung by the position of the United States, and European nations, including ours, incapable of changing course. Perhaps most important for our purposes in a post-Brexit world, where the UK-US special relationship is at the heart of our assumed projection of power and influence, I am left wondering what power and influence Britain alone actually has.

For the many champions of democracy around the world, including in Taiwan, events have already created a sense of unease about the willingness of the world's democracies to support each other when our way of life is challenged and put at risk. The Taliban have been celebrating their victory over the militarily superior

nations with China and Russia, which maintain their position in Afghanistan and form relationships with the Taliban—collaborative and celebratory relationships between authoritarian nations against the free and liberal democracies of the world.

My heart goes out to the Afghan people. As a Member of this House, I feel deeply sorry for the events that have unfolded. I, too, pay tribute to the many servicemen and women who have served. We all expect Ministers to put significant energy into our efforts in Afghanistan on evacuation, asylum, aid and international diplomacy. I also expect Ministers, not least our Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, to wake up to Britain's quickly declining influence in the world and the risk that that poses to our country. That can be turned around, but it will require renewed effort and statesmanslike leadership that befits Britain's historical status in the world. I sincerely hope that the Government have it in them.

16:08:00

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)

Winston Churchill said:

“Wars are not won by evacuations.”—[Official Report, 4 June 1940; Vol. 361, c. 791.]

The debacle we have sadly just witnessed in Afghanistan was more akin to the fall of Saigon than the miracle of Dunkirk. There is no hiding from the fact that we have just suffered a most grievous defeat. Our 150,000 veterans fought bravely in the noble cause of a better life for the ordinary people of Afghanistan. It is not their fault. We now have 457 compelling reasons for learning from this. I support the call from the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Chairman of the Defence Committee for a Franks-style inquiry to learn what went wrong.

Another war leader, Napoleon Bonaparte once said:

“The moral is to the physical as three is to one”.

When NATO needlessly withdrew key enablers on which the Afghan army still relied for protection, their morale rapidly collapsed. This was a NATO mission, which began as an article 5 request when the United States suffered a terrorist Pearl Harbor on 9/11. They asked for our help and we gave it.

Twenty years on, whether we blame President Trump for a bad deal with the Taliban or President Biden, who, remember, on 8 July told the American people,

“There’s going to be no circumstances where you see people being lifted off the roof of the embassy of the United States from Afghanistan”,

the buck stops with him—oh yes, it does. But we are not blameless in Britain either. Our own National Security Council was caught completely flatfooted, although the Defence Secretary, to his eternal credit, did, perhaps with a soldier’s instincts, appreciate what was going to happen and sought desperately to assemble a coalition of the willing among European nations, only to discover they were anything but willing to prevent what happened next.

What do these events mean not just for Afghanistan but for the security of the strait of Hormuz, the Baltic states, Ukraine or even Taiwan? NATO has been the cornerstone of our security for more than 70 years, and it has just suffered a strategic defeat for the first time in its history. I am terribly sorry, as an Atlanticist all my life, that President Biden’s deeply isolationist speech on Monday was extremely worrying. If the midterm results in the United States are more important than the security and freedom of the free world, we had better work out pretty quickly what global Britain means, because it seems that global America just fell off its horse and died.

16:11:00

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)

We speak about our surprise at the collapse of the Afghan Government and the takeover by the Taliban, but the reality is that the 2020 Doha agreement and the withdrawal of troops gave the Taliban a timeframe to plan around. It also saw 500 Taliban prisoners released to help in the coup, and now the Taliban have taken over, we have seen terrorists let out of jail to wreak havoc.

This year alone, the increased violence and fighting displaced 550,000 people and caused the UK Government to expedite the interpreter relocation scheme, and by July the Taliban had recaptured a quarter of districts from the Afghan Government. That means that there were serious intelligence failures or huge political misjudgements in joining the dots, as there was no contingency exit planning. Was any intelligence picked up about the Taliban working with local officials and security forces to persuade them to swap sides?

We have seen the US spend a staggering \$1 trillion over 20 years to achieve the collapse of the regime rather than the reconstruction of Afghanistan. It seems that that money sustained corruption, rather than tackled it. The reality is that it is 20 years of foreign policy failure, with 457 British soldiers killed and a quarter of a million deaths overall, including more than 70,000 civilians. Then we have the wounded, the impoverished and the millions of refugees. It is truly tragic.

There was hope with the return of women's rights, women working, women politicians and more children at school, but what does the future hold for them? We have heard that, in relative terms, the Taliban are saying the right things about not being as strict as before, but they still want sharia law, and many of the old faces feature in the new regime. When the Taliban reclaim provincial districts, reports suggest that, as well as violence, women are already being made to wear the hijab and are required to have a male companion to go out in public.

While a Taliban spokesperson yesterday was doing a charm offensive to CNN, a reporter was told to stand aside, as a woman, and was told that compulsory burqa wearing will return. Those are clear warning signs for the future, including the reprisal killings that have already happened and the veiled threats that people will only be safe if they show remorse.

A previous study found that 65% of children had encountered displacement or acts of violence, or had witnessed beatings, deaths or the mutilation of bodies. That in itself might explain the fragility of the security forces. It certainly explains the widespread fear of the many civilians trying to flee Kabul.

After the final collapse, while we are pulling out, the Foreign Secretary tells us that the UK will hold the Taliban to account. Are we really to believe that? They have been planning for years while we have ignored our so-called allies aiding and abetting—historically, it was Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and now the United Arab Emirates is reportedly turning a blind eye to Taliban drug money being laundered in Dubai. With so many political failures in the past 20 years, we need a judge-led inquiry to get to the bottom of this and learn lessons for the future.

16:14:00

John Howell (Henley) (Con)

I have never been in the military and I have never visited Afghanistan, but I represent a constituency, and actually live in a village, where large numbers are and have. RAF Benson has provided helicopters to Afghanistan. Its Pumas have

served in Afghanistan since 2015. How do I represent to them that what they have achieved has been a success? Yes, they have been involved in anti-terrorism, but they have also been involved in the process of state building. They are an exceptional team who have served well. They have been based at Kabul airport and have provided vital airborne transport. Look at the statistics of what they have achieved. They have done 12,800 flying hours. They have carried 126,000 passengers. They have also carried 660,000 kg of freight. We will offer our congratulations to them, I am sure, right across the House, for giving so much to that mission.

I also want to raise the status of a number of girls in Kabul who are active musicians. The young women and girls of the Afghan women's orchestra and their peers at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music were special guests of the UK Government, and of an orchestra in my constituency, for performances in the UK in 2019. Promoting girls' education and reducing the impact of conflict on women and girls used to be key priorities for the Foreign Office in Afghanistan. The achievements of the Afghan women's orchestra embody the values at the core of those priorities, and for those reasons the Foreign Office was proud to be playing a role in the orchestra's visit to the UK.

On Sunday night we received a text message from some of the orchestra. It said:

“Today I went to school. I wanted to practise. After a few minutes our teacher said go home because the situation and security is not good ... It's really dangerous because the Taliban even can't hear the sound of music ... I have no hope for the future of music development in Afghanistan.”

I feel great sympathy for those girls, and I ask Ministers to do what they can to make sure that those girls are released from that captivity and brought safely to the UK.

16:17:00

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op)

I have felt sick to my stomach this week for Afghan friends, for our veterans and their families, for those fleeing in terror, and at scenes of bodies falling from planes in the sky. I find it hard to comprehend, as I think many others have throughout this House and in my constituency in these last few days.

I pay tribute to all of our forces, to all who have served—in this House, in my own family, among my constituents—to those 457 who never came back, to those injured physically and mentally, to those Department for International Development staff and non-governmental organisations that I was proud to work alongside, to human rights defenders, especially those working with women and girls, to our media and journalists, especially our BBC World Service and language services, and to those Afghan soldiers. Thousands of them died for their country and freedoms; to suggest otherwise is completely wrong.

For the sacrifices of all of them were not in vain, as the Leader of the Opposition and so many others have said in today's debate. They did succeed in making a difference to communities, in countering terrorism and in making a difference to individuals. I saw that for myself in places like Musa Qala and elsewhere. The failures that we shamefully now see are not theirs; they are at the political and strategic level.

I recall, in Helmand, in Lashkar Gah, after meeting the governor, being told by somebody, "You are willing to expend the blood and treasure, but the Taliban strategy is to run down the clock and to see if you have the patience." Well, they certainly figured that out. We now risk another failure if we accept the slick Taliban PR spin that we have heard over the past few days, while they execute, make lists, shoot civilians in the street and caveat everything with talk about rights within their system of justice, especially for women. Let's not be fooled.

Over the past few days we have seen remarkable work on the ground by our troops and our ambassador, but frankly they have been let down by a Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary asleep at the wheel. They were already warned of the failures in supporting translators and others who supported our troops and our civilians, but they were caught unawares by the chaos at the airport. We need to ensure that every safe route is used and that we can get people safely to the airport and out by other routes if possible, and we need to base that on need, not arbitrary numbers, using every plane and resource.

Let us not forget that the Government have been cutting aid to Afghanistan, so we need urgent clarity on this new announcement, not least when we see such great needs elsewhere in the world, including Tigray and, in recent days, Haiti. Is it new money or is it being diverted? How will it be delivered? Will we follow a Zimbabwe-type model, where we ensure that it does not go through a despotic Government? Will it go through the UN or through NGOs? How will the plans that we had in place be delivered?

Finally, I agree with the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) that there were not simple binary choices here; there were other options, and this has been wrong at every level. We have to be aware of the consequences for our own security and that of our allies, for civilians, democracy, development and human rights in the world if we carry on down this path of diminishing retreat.

16:20:00

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)

I was able to visit Afghanistan in November 2011 as a member of the valuable armed forces parliamentary scheme. We went into Bastion, and at the outset we were reminded why we were there in the first place—to prevent Afghan territory from being used by al-Qaeda as a base from which to attack the UK and its allies. In that we have succeeded, but the question for the House today has been whether what has happened over the past week makes that more or less likely. I think the answer is that it makes an event of that nature more likely than previously, and that is a matter of great concern.

In the week of our visit, three UK servicemen lost their lives, and we now know that 457 lives were lost. It is important to consider the thoughts of their comrades and families now. Again, the question for the House has been whether the sacrifice was worth it in relation to what was achieved. I am reassured by the remarks of Members who have served that those sacrifices were not in vain.

On my visit, we learned about the threat of IEDs to personnel, and many servicemen have had life-changing injuries. I heard only the other day from one of them, for whom current events brought memories flooding back. It is good to hear that there will be adequate support for mental health, and it has been good to hear Members' passionate demands for that.

We also saw some of the kit that our armed forces had. It was horrifying to see TV pictures the other day of Taliban wearing some of the protective wear and with the vehicles. How much of that equipment is now with the Taliban, and what use might they make of it?

We had lunch in a mocked-up Afghan village on the base, with the soldiers and local Afghan workers who were on the base. I think about those people that I met. Where are they now? These are the people to whom we have a duty. We need to get them out. Once we have secured the safety and departure of UK nationals,

these people must be looked after. It is to the Government's credit that we have created the Afghan relocations and assistance policy to get more people out. There will be much more to do in coming weeks.

Back in 2011, the objective was to start the transfer of authority to the Afghan army and police force. That was starting to happen, with our troops remaining in a non-combat role. Only now do we understand how important that was. In 2011 there was great confidence that Afghan forces would be able to take over once we had left. How misplaced that confidence looks now.

In my concluding remarks in an article for the local newspaper, I noted how I came away in 2011 with a sense of our role at that time, and that I would have a better understanding of the issues involved. However, it appears that we have not learned the lessons, and there will be a great deal more to find out about the final few weeks.

16:23:00

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab)

Today, nearly 20 years since Tony Blair dutifully followed George W. Bush to war in Afghanistan, this House has an obligation to learn its lessons and to ensure that its mistakes are never repeated. I want to start by stating a hard but clear truth that some in this House do not want to hear: the 20-year war on Afghanistan was a mistake of catastrophic proportions, causing untold human tragedy, with 240,000 people killed—men, women and children—including tens of thousands of innocent Afghan civilians and 457 British personnel. This House must never again send British service personnel to die in futile wars.

Rather than repeating the mistakes of the past, we must learn that lesson for the future. The west cannot build liberal democracies with bombs and bullets. That dangerous fantasy, cooked up by neo-conservative fanatics in Washington and championed by their faithful followers in London, has brought untold death and destruction to Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and many other places, in wars that have made us all unsafe. Today, we must rid ourselves of the delusion that the answer to failed intervention is yet more intervention and dispense with the belief that freedom abroad and safety at home can be won through wars and regime change.

After all this bloodshed, we have a special duty to the people of Afghanistan. Today, as Afghans flee for their lives—with heart-breaking images of people desperately clinging on to planes, hoping that the sky is safer than the land—the

Afghan asylum seekers who are already here must be provided with an unconditional amnesty. On that issue, I want to raise again with the Government the case of my constituent Jamal and his father. Jamal was a translator for the British Army for six years and his father worked as a gardener in a British base. While Jamal made it safely to Coventry, a proud city of sanctuary, his father has been denied relocation and is still in Afghanistan in grave danger. I have written to the Secretary of State, but I have not received a reply, so today I urge the Government to act immediately and provide safe passage for Jamal's father and all Afghans who face that threat from the Taliban.

The war on Afghanistan was the first war on terror. I was just seven years old when British air strikes hit the country. A few years later, the now Prime Minister wrote, "We are in Afghanistan to teach them the value of democracy." Today, after 20 years of bloodshed, it is incumbent on us to learn that democracy cannot be bombed into existence and that American military might is no friend of freedom, and to ensure that this first war on terror is Britain's last war of aggression.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)

Order. I apologise to more than 80 Members who did not get in, but the final contribution before the wind-ups is from Antony Higginbotham. Please do not take interventions because we will not add any time on.

16:26:00

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con)

Thank you very much for fitting me in, Mr Deputy Speaker.

When the Taliban were removed all those years ago, the people of Afghanistan were given hope—hope that life could be better, that opportunities would open up, that they could go to school and university, and that they could finally decide their own future at the ballot box. That is why the scenes we have seen this week have been so heart-breaking. That hope came because of the hard work and sacrifices of our armed forces, our allies and the thousands and thousands of Afghans—in their armed forces, as well as the interpreters—who worked with us. Tens of thousands of UK personnel all have their own memories of the conflict, good and bad, and our message to them all should be that we are incredibly proud of what they did. We should be incredibly proud of what the Afghans did too. They provided security for us here at home, dismantling terrorist training camps, and not just provided hope for ordinary Afghans but delivered, too. Our message to our veterans is that if they need our help now it is there for them.

When combat operations ended, the mission changed. Our forces were then there to train. They were building the confidence of and offering reassurance to the Afghan armed forces, the Afghan Government and civic society. Confidence building and reassurance is not quick and easy. It is complex, difficult and enduring. There is no clear end. I think that the Government recognise that. It is weaved into the integrated review, and I commend them for the work that the Secretary of State for Defence did to try to rebuild a coalition, but it has highlighted a weakness of NATO and coalitions—over-reliance on a single partner, and a single partner who can act unilaterally. We need to learn those lessons and ensure that when we enter into operations with NATO and others we do it as true partners.

Our task now is to preserve the security gains that have been made, to support our veterans, to get our people and Afghans out as quickly as possible and to make sure that those lessons never need to be learned again.

16:29:00

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab)

Some moments in this debate were among the most harrowing I can remember in 11 years in Parliament. I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), and in particular to the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). They make me proud to be a Member of this House. No matter how painful and difficult it has been for them to speak up over recent weeks, they have done it. They have done the veterans of Afghanistan proud and they have shown themselves to be true friends to the Afghan people. They have refused to despair, even at the darkest moments, because they know better than most of us that despair is a luxury that Afghans, and the world, simply cannot afford.

Those hon. Members have given voice to something that tens of thousands of families in Britain are feeling—our friends, neighbours and constituents who served, lost loved ones or suffered life-changing injuries, and are wondering now what it was all for. They should not accept that this is the end of two decades of sacrifice, or that the degradation of terrorists, the hard-won progress for women and girls, the landmine clearance programme, the access to healthcare, the clean water and the emergence of fragile democracy can be allowed to unravel in just a few days while the world looks away. Like so many of us who have spoken in this

debate, they find it impossible to reconcile where we are now, and how it could possibly have come to this.

We recognise that the decision by the United States to withdraw its military presence created an impossible situation for the United Kingdom. As the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, NATO's intention was always to withdraw, but it was to withdraw in a planned and orderly way, linked to conditions. This has failed all those tests. Some 18 months after the decision was made to withdraw at Doha and four months after the timetable was established, the airport is overwhelmed, paperwork cannot be processed, and Ministers openly admit that people will be left behind and that some of them will die.

This is an unparalleled moment of shame for this Government. Security at the airport is now in the gift of the Taliban, and it appears that the Government have no agreement beyond 31 August, in just 12 days' time. Is it correct that we are wholly reliant on a fragile agreement between the United States and the Taliban, a deal that offers no guarantees that UK evacuations can continue if the US withdrawal is completed before that date and ours is not? Is it correct that no conversations have taken place between the UK and Taliban leaders about that access? Does the Foreign Secretary realise that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said, his own Department is still advising British nationals remaining in Afghanistan to shelter in place unless further flight options become available, and to keep an eye on Twitter for updates?

The tragedy of all this is that even those people the Government recognise, such as the Chevening scholars who the Prime Minister made a personal promise to this week and this morning, have told us they cannot get through the Taliban roadblocks to the airport and they will be abandoned. This has so much significance for those young Afghans. They represent a generation of promising leaders who are watching the future that they worked and hoped for unravel in front of their eyes.

People—especially women—have burned documents that link them to the UK for their own safety, and so are being turned away at airport perimeters. A British national has been sheltering in a park in Kabul with her young children in recent days because her house was burned down and local people are too scared to offer them shelter. Their MP was promised a phone call from the Foreign Secretary's private office two days ago. It has not come. What use are promises that are never kept?

The Prime Minister made promises this morning that practically, at this time, he knows the Government cannot fulfil. The Foreign Secretary must address that today. As many hon. Members have said, one of the consequences of the chaos that Ministers have allowed to engulf us is that people will not trust us again. What can he tell them today that will start to put that right?

He will have heard my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) talk about the number of people who helped us but who the Government still refuse to recognise.

How have we become this country that drags its feet on saving the lives of those who supported us and stands by while the refugee crisis unfolds? The Prime Minister said last night that we would take 20,000 refugees, but how can anyone believe him? He has made promises before. He promised he would protect the Alf Dubs scheme and give sanctuary to child refugees, and then he closed it. We are better than this.

The Government have given us a press release when what we need is a plan. What is the scale of the refugee crisis that the Government anticipate? What efforts have they made through the United Nations to co-ordinate a global response that is based on a clear assessment of the needs of Afghans, not on numbers plucked out of thin air with no plan for implementation? If I were in the Prime Minister's shoes, I would be moving heaven and earth to ensure that we live up to our obligations and show the world that we can be relied on—not least by the women and girls who we encouraged and supported to take on positions of authority but who now find themselves the targets of Taliban brutality. Where is the message from the United Kingdom that they are not alone?

When the Prime Minister took office two years ago, we led the world in development assistance, but even now, after the Taliban have taken control, there is no urgency or seriousness about addressing the humanitarian crisis that confronts us. Can we be honest? It is not honest to claim to be doubling aid to Afghanistan when just a few months ago it was cut by half. The Prime Minister should remember that, given that the only statement he made to the House on Afghanistan was when he came to tell us he was cutting the aid budget. I wonder if, after this debate is over, he will reveal that the refugee programme the Government unveiled this morning will be paid for by raiding the aid budget.

Alicia Kearns

You raise how many times the Prime Minister has spoken on Afghanistan in the Chamber—[Hon. Members: “You!”] Sorry: the shadow Foreign Secretary mentions the number of times the Prime Minister has spoken about Afghanistan in this House. Will she remind us how many times she has mentioned Afghanistan in this place since coming to the Front Bench?

Mr Speaker

Order. It is not my responsibility. Please try not to use “you”, because I am not the example.

Lisa Nandy

I am glad the hon. Lady raises that point, Mr Speaker, because it is a sign of an increasingly desperate Government that they launch that sort of attack. Let me tell her what we have been doing in recent months. In April, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) told the Defence Secretary:

“Now, with the full withdrawal of NATO troops, it is hard to see a future without bloodier conflict, wider Taliban control, and greater jeopardy for those Afghans who worked with the west and for the women now in political, judicial, academic and business roles.” —[Official Report, 20 April 2021; Vol. 692, c. 853.]

Last month, my right hon. Friend the shadow First Secretary of State said that if we simply wash our hands and walk away—[Interruption.] The Government do not want to hear it because they have been warned and warned and warned about the consequences by Members on both sides of the House, but they have ignored us and their own Back Benchers. They have abandoned the people of Afghanistan. It is a moment of shame and they should apologise.

It is dishonest to claim to be doubling aid to Afghanistan when it was previously halved. I wonder if we will find out after this debate is over that the refugee programme the Government unveiled this morning will be paid for by raiding the aid budget. The Foreign Secretary says that we cannot just hand over funds to the Taliban. He is right, but that means we have to work harder and smarter. Has he mapped the capacity across Afghanistan to deliver aid? Has he spoken to the United Nations, which intends to provide a presence on the ground? When did he talk to the UN and what has it agreed? Has he spoken to the international NGOs that have been there for years? Why has he not yet agreed a common approach with the American Government, who I spoke to last night?

Forgive me, but no one will be reassured by the Prime Minister's remarks this morning. There was no serious plan to deal with the reality of Taliban rule or the threat to the UK. We went into Afghanistan to degrade the capability of al-Qaeda—[Interruption.] A bit of humility from the Defence Secretary might be in order, given what is unfolding before our eyes at Kabul airport. We went into Afghanistan after 67 British citizens were murdered in the 9/11 attacks, and thanks to the success of our armed forces, no terrorist attack has been launched from Afghanistan for 20 years. But now we have been chased from the country by the Taliban, giving encouragement to those who wish us harm, and our counter-terror operation appears to have collapsed.

What can the Foreign Secretary tell us that he is doing to build up the intelligence picture beyond Kabul and share intelligence with international partners? He needs to outline a strategy today for dealing with the new reality in which we find ourselves. What leverage do the Government think, in practical terms, we can exert over the brutal Taliban regime that took power through violence and displaced a democratically elected Government? The regime persecutes women, journalists, LGBT and religious minorities, to name but a few. We should be identifying any leverage we have: freezing the assets of the Afghan Government or central bank that are in UK accounts or financial institutions; developing sanctions with our partners; and making clear the consequences of Afghanistan once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorism.

We are witnessing the absence of leadership. We hold the presidency of the G7, and we are permanent members of the UN Security Council and leading members of NATO, but the Government are behaving as if they have no agency and no power. They were missing in action when it mattered, and have been dragged to the Chamber today to account for the greatest foreign policy crisis of our generation. It should be sobering for the Government that not one single speech has been uncritical of their approach. In the cold, hard light of the catastrophe unfolding in Afghanistan, their approach to the world looks so much less palatable than the global Britain gloss they have tried to coat it with: slashing aid with shameful slogans such as the "giant cash machine" in the sky, which pulled the rug out from under people who relied on us; promising to maintain the size of the armed forces in the election, and then cutting them to their smallest size for 300 years; needlessly, repeatedly, trashing the alliances that we need in the world, and our reputation; deliberately violating international law; and shutting down safe and legal routes to asylum. Who can say now that that is not a shameful decision, given what we are witnessing in Afghanistan?

The decision to withdraw troops did not need to lead to this. I have heard the Foreign Secretary say in recent days that there was no alternative but to leave like this, but that is not true. We could have used the past 18 months to plan our exit and make it clear to the Afghan people that we had no intention of walking away from them or their ongoing aspiration for democracy, but that we would withdraw with care, with planning and with redoubled efforts to be a long-term partner to the Afghan people, even without our troops on the ground. The alternative to a chaotic exit is not endless war, as the Foreign Secretary has tried to argue, but a patient, tireless, pursuit of peace and a Government who have the stamina to commit.

We should be inspired by the troops, aid workers, journalists, photographers, support staff, civilian contractors, armed forces who returned to evacuate people in recent days, diplomatic staff—most of all the ambassador, who has embodied what courage looks like—and those who have remained to help those who are trying to exit. They stand for something important. They stand for a country that feels a deep sense of responsibility to our fellow human beings and believes that when we make promises, we should keep them. They stand for a country that knows that the world beyond our shores shapes the lives of people in villages, towns and cities across this country and that we cannot ever afford to turn away. They are supported, as it turns out, by very many more people than we ever knew.

In every nation and region, people believe that we can be a force for good in the world, and through this awful crisis they have found their voice. They are women's groups raising the alarm for their brave Afghan counterparts, journalists trying to get Afghan colleagues to safety, and local leaders across this country standing up to welcome refugees. They know it is hard and that we have to be in it for the long haul. They know that it relies on give, not just take, to build friendships and alliances that we can call on in times like this. A Government who were honest with themselves would see that, alongside the United States, we must have a broader set of alliances so that we can operate an independent foreign and security policy again. We should not lecture EU countries to show leadership over refugees, but do that ourselves. We should lead by example with generosity and decency, and step forward when it matters, not go missing when things get tough. A self-confident country is one that goes out with courage and conviction and sheds light, not just might, around the world. That is the light that we showed for two decades in Afghanistan. In short, it is everything that this Government are not.

Today the Foreign Secretary has a choice. He can read out the notes that he holds in front of him, or he could tear them up and tell us the truth. How will we help? How will we repair this? How will we rise to the scale of this challenge and show that we are a serious country again, prepared to engage in the world and to stand up for values, especially when that is hard? He has hours, not days, to make this right with so many Afghan people and to repair our reputation around the world. We have so much to be proud of as a country—can it again include our Government?

16:44:00

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab)

I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions. The debate has demonstrated why this House's voice had to be heard and why it was right to recall Parliament. We have heard important speeches and interventions from Members on both sides of the House expressing deep concern about the situation that we can all now see unfolding in front of our eyes in Afghanistan. Together, we think of the sacrifices made by so many of our armed forces to keep us safe at home, and to lay the foundations for hope and a better life for the people of Afghanistan. I know that many hon. Members have served in the armed forces, some in Afghanistan, and how important our response to the current crisis will be to Members on both sides of the House.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) made a very powerful contribution about the gains made in the last 20 years in protecting and supporting women and girls. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) made the case for ARAP and the support we give to those involved. I hope that the Scottish Government will help us with that resettlement and I will take him up on the overture that I think he made in good faith. I also thank the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who spoke particularly powerfully about the generation of women and girls empowered by UK and western intervention over the last 20 years. She is absolutely right that we must do everything we can to safeguard the gains that were made.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) made important points about the over-centralised paradigm that had been applied in Afghanistan, and that was echoed by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood). There was some agreement across the House about that. My hon.

Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) gave voice to the frustrations that many veterans will feel as we withdraw. He also made an important point—he was referring to PTSD and other conditions—about dealing with the mental health of our veterans at what will be a very difficult time for many of them.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con)

Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the many brave members of our armed forces who have returned to face the world after their service in Afghanistan with life-changing injuries? Will he also join me in thanking the past and present staff of the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre, which is now based in Stanford Hall in Rushcliffe, for their tireless work to help those people?

Dominic Raab

I thank my hon. Friend. We pay tribute to all those who have returned and paid the price, through physical or mental health injuries, and, of course, a huge tribute goes out to all those organisations that are supporting them.

Chris Bryant

Will the Secretary of State give way?

Dominic Raab

May I make a little progress and then I will come back to the hon. Gentleman?

I thought that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis)—I do not know whether he is back in the Chamber—spoke particularly powerfully about the need for a concerted international response. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) gave voice to a veteran in her constituency, Jack Cummings, and spoke about the sacrifices that were made by so many on the battlefield.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) also made a very powerful speech in which he made the point that how we leave is as important, if not more important, than the question of withdrawal itself. I can tell him, because he asked a specific question, that we tested the approach very rigorously with our US allies when they consulted us. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) also gave witness to the many terrified Afghans who now face the threat and risk that come with Taliban control.

Chris Bryant

Lots of my constituents have got in touch today to say that the thing that they are most anxious about—many Members reflected this during the debate—is those people who are terrified in Afghanistan today and want to get out. We want to help many of them to get out of Afghanistan but, for some reason, we are saying that we will take 20,000 over several years, but only 5,000 this year. If the Government could simply say that whoever manages to get here this year, we will take this year, that would be a significant advance.

Dominic Raab

I will come on to address that matter, but I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) gave a courageous speech.

Yvette Cooper

Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dominic Raab

Can I just make a little progress? I have already given way and will do so again when I come to that point.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire gave a truly courageous speech. I welcome his contribution and we welcome him back to the Chamber. My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) asked us about the application of ARAP to the British Council staff and indeed whether it applied. It does apply and we are straining every sinew to make sure that it can work and be applied to them as effectively as possible. I will come on to explain the practical arrangements and challenges that we have around that.

Zarah Sultana

Will the Secretary of State give way?

Dominic Raab

I will make a little progress.

There were many other heartfelt, insightful and truly valuable contributions in the House today.

I also listened very carefully to those on the Labour Front Bench. The right hon. and learned Gentleman, the leader of the Labour party, made it clear that he supported the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. He listed a range of things that he quite rightly wants the Government to do, including supporting the UN efforts, taking action in the UN Security Council, gaining support through NATO, providing support for ordinary Afghans, and not allowing money aid to go to the Taliban. We are doing all those things, and rightly so. He did not give a single example of an action that he would have taken that we have not—not one—but then issued a series of searing criticisms. The shadow Foreign Secretary took a similar approach in her speech, and I will come to address the various points that she and he made.

Tim Farron

Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dominic Raab

I will make a little progress.

I welcome what the shadow Foreign Secretary said about our ambassador, Sir Laurie Bristow, and the team on the ground. In case there was any doubt, the shadow Foreign Minister, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), said yesterday that the Labour party has no problem with the American decision to withdraw troops. The leader of the Labour party agreed with the decision to withdraw, but now, with his predictable proclivity for hindsight, criticises the consequences of a decision that he backed, and he does so with no serious or credible alternative of his own—not even the hint of one. It is a reminder of Shakespeare's adage that the empty vessel makes the greatest sound.

In any crisis, it is how we respond that is critical, and the Government have two overriding priorities. First, we must evacuate our own people—the British nationals and the dual nationals in Afghanistan who now want to leave—and those who have served our country so loyally. Allied to that, we must live up to the best traditions of this country in playing our part in offering safe haven to those Afghans who are now fleeing persecution from the Taliban.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con)

It is absolutely right that the United Kingdom makes this generous offer to the people of Afghanistan who need somewhere safe to come, but there is concern among my constituents that, in being generous and open, we do not open the door to those who wish to come here to do us harm. Can the Foreign Secretary

confirm that robust checks will be in place to ensure that no one who wished to do us harm will be able to get here through this route?

Dominic Raab

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, we need to be open-hearted and generous, but if we were to allow people to come to this country who subsequently attacked this country, we would be back in this House debating a very different set of issues. Therefore, we need to make sure that we have some basic checks in place and that the seats on those planes go to those whom we want them to go to.

I will make some progress. I have been very generous.

I pay tribute to those leading this work. I have already mentioned Sir Laurie Bristow, our ambassador. There is a phenomenal cross-Whitehall team of military personnel—I pay tribute to the Defence Secretary, the Home Office officials and also the Home Secretary. The teams are working hand in glove. With gunfire overhead, those on the ground are working to save others before they get out themselves.

I want to pay tribute also to the rapid deployment team that flew into Kabul last night to support that effort and to the troops who went in to protect them and secure the airport so that we could prosecute this evacuation effort. We are straining every sinew on that evacuation effort, and it is supported by the crisis team in King Charles Street, with Home Office experts and military planners. They are working around the clock, and I pay tribute to them, having visited them yesterday.

Yvette Cooper

I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving way. May I ask him specifically about the ARAP programme? Will he expand it to cover not just the British Council, but those working for UK aid agencies and UK contractors, and those who have worked for UK-funded programmes, who are also in fear for their lives, hiding from and being chased by the Taliban as we speak? Will he include them in the relocation programme, as Members from both sides of the House have called for?

Dominic Raab

Let me come on and address the totality of the arrangements—I think that will answer squarely her point. The evacuation effort has three strands, and by the way, it has been in place for four months.

First, it is worth recalling that we advised all British nationals to leave Afghanistan back in April, and many hundreds did so on commercial flights, with the benefit of consular support and advice from our team. Since the security situation deteriorated last weekend, we switched to charter flights to get nationals out, as well as those under the ARAP scheme. The first flight left Kabul on Sunday with around 150 UK nationals and their dependants on board, and they have arrived back in this country safe and sound. In the last 24 hours, 646 people have been evacuated—a combination of nationals, Afghans who worked for us, and UK allies—and there will be eight flights following today.

Zarah Sultana

On that point, will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Dominic Raab

I will make some more progress because I have only four minutes and I have already given way on a number of occasions.

The crucial point is that in order to secure the airport, we had to inject 600 British forces, and we had thousands come in from the Americans. Without that, we would not be able to get any of those people to the airport, or indeed out of it, or process them in the way we need to.

The second strand of the evacuation, beyond British nationals, is the ARAP programme. It was also set up—by the Defence Secretary, back in April—to help those who worked for us and who now face the risk of retribution precisely because of the loyalty that they showed to our country. To date, we have resettled over 3,300 Afghan staff and their families, including 2,000 since April. It is the most generous scheme of its kind offered anywhere in the world, and rightly so.

Rehman Chishti

I am most grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving way, and I thank him for all he is doing. The United Kingdom led the way on the Friends of Syria group in convening the international community to bring forward a humanitarian package. Will the United Kingdom do the same for Afghanistan, with countries like the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Kuwait, which are also part of the NATO action in Afghanistan?

Dominic Raab

I thank my hon. Friend, who is absolutely right to raise that point, which I will come to if he allows me to.

The third strand of the evacuation scheme is, as my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary announced today, our plan to provide a bespoke asylum offer to settle 20,000 Afghan refugees over five years. Like the Home Secretary, let me just say that, as the son of a refugee, I am deeply proud that this Government are continuing the big-hearted tradition of the British people in offering safe haven to those fleeing persecution. We are getting out our nationals and those who worked for us, and we are providing a lifeline to the most vulnerable. I can also tell the House today that we have contacted all the Chevening scholars in Afghanistan, not just to tell them that they can come, but to actively make arrangements for the upcoming flights to the UK.

At a time of crisis, we also need to look to the longer term, and there are four areas that need particular focus. First, on counter-terrorism, we must never again allow Afghanistan to be a haven for terrorists. We will work very closely with all our partners within the parameters that the current situation allows.

Secondly, the international community must be prepared to respond to the humanitarian plight caused by the Taliban's campaign. The UK is already using our convening power and our aid budget to galvanise the global response.

Thirdly, we must work to safeguard regional stability. That will require us to work with different partners, and it will require engagement with key regional players, including India, China, Russia, Pakistan and central Asian states, however difficult, complex or outside of our comfort zone that may prove. We will fully support the efforts of the UN Secretary-General's special envoy to Afghanistan, Jean Arnault.

The fourth area is human rights and accountability. Through our domestic sanctions regime and by working with the Indians, who chair the UN sanctions regime for Afghanistan, we will make sure that we can exercise a moderating influence on the Taliban regime. We will pursue each of those areas with vigour. As the Prime Minister has already made clear, we will convene a special meeting of G7 leaders to consider a concerted and co-ordinated response. We will look at the question of a contact group of international partners on Afghanistan, and we plan an event at the UN General Assembly next month to focus minds and raise funds for the humanitarian response.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the situation in Afghanistan.

17:00:00

House adjourned.