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Wednesday
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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)

HOUSE OF LORDS

OFFICIAL REPORT

ORDER OF BUSINESS

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Deaths of Members | 469 |
| Afghanistan | |
| <i>Motion to Take Note</i> | 469 |

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The following abbreviations are used to show a Member's party affiliation:

| Abbreviation | Party/Group |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| CB | Cross Bench |
| Con | Conservative |
| DUP | Democratic Unionist Party |
| GP | Green Party |
| Ind Lab | Independent Labour |
| Ind SD | Independent Social Democrat |
| Ind UU | Independent Ulster Unionist |
| Lab | Labour |
| Lab Co-op | Labour and Co-operative Party |
| LD | Liberal Democrat |
| Non-afl | Non-affiliated |
| PC | Plaid Cymru |
| UKIP | UK Independence Party |
| UUP | Ulster Unionist Party |

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House of Lords

Wednesday 18 August 2021

The House met in a hybrid proceeding.

11 am

Prayers—read by the Lord Bishop of Peterborough.

Arrangement of Business

Announcement

11.07 am

The Lord Speaker (Lord McFall of Alcluith): My Lords, the Hybrid Sitting of the House will now begin. Some Members are here in the Chamber while others are participating remotely, but all Members will be treated equally. The social distancing requirements in the Chamber have been removed, but I strongly encourage Members to continue to wear face coverings while in the Chamber except when speaking and to respect social distancing in relation to the staff in the Chamber.

I begin by recalling the shocking and tragic incident that took place in Plymouth on 12 August. I know that I speak for the whole House when I extend our thoughts and condolences to the loved ones of those who lost their lives and to the whole community of Keyham. I place on record our continued thanks to the police and emergency services, which work tirelessly to keep us safe, and to those members of the public who displayed courage and bravery when helping the victims and their families.

I also place on record today, as we gather to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, our gratitude to all the service personnel of this country who have died, been injured and risked their lives during this conflict.

Deaths of Members

Announcement

11.09 am

The Lord Speaker (Lord McFall of Alcluith): My Lords, I regret to inform the House of the deaths of the noble Lord, Lord Smith of Leigh, on 2 August and of the noble Viscount, Lord Simon, on 15 August. On behalf of the House, I extend our condolences to the noble Lords' families and friends.

Afghanistan

Motion to Take Note

11.09 am

Moved by Baroness Evans of Bowes Park

That this House takes note of the situation in Afghanistan.

The Lord Privy Seal (Baroness Evans of Bowes Park) (Con): My Lords, I thank everyone participating today and all the parliamentary staff who have enabled us to meet at such short notice. Before I turn to today's

debate, I want to echo the words of the Lord Speaker in sending our condolences to the families and friends of those killed in Plymouth last week. Investigations are ongoing, but we will learn every possible lesson from the tragedy.

It is clear to us all that the situation in Afghanistan is extremely grave and exceptionally concerning. The number of your Lordships taking part in this debate demonstrates how seriously this House takes the situation, and my noble friend Lord Ahmad and I look forward to hearing today's contributions. We are fortunate to have across the House a wealth of expertise in diplomacy, defence, human rights—particularly in relation to women and girls—international aid and development, and some Members of the House have very personal experience of Afghanistan. I pay tribute to all who have served there during the past 20 years, including of course our staff and noble Lords. We remember in particular the 457 British troops who tragically lost their lives and all those who sustained injuries, some of which were life-changing.

At this difficult time, it is important to remember why we went into Afghanistan in the first place. Our primary objective, when NATO invoked Article 5 of its treaty for the first time in its history and the United Kingdom and others joined America in deploying, was to ensure that Afghanistan was not used as a base for international terrorism and to do whatever we could to stabilise the country. We succeeded in that core mission: there has not been a successful international terrorist attack on the West mounted from Afghanistan since, terrorist training camps in the mountains were destroyed and al-Qaeda plots against this country were foiled. As the Lord Speaker rightly said, we should be immensely proud of the role that our Armed Forces, diplomats and development specialists have played in supporting Afghanistan over the past 20 years.

As noble Lords will know, the main combat phase of our mission ended in 2014, when we brought the great majority of our troops home and handed over responsibility for security to the Afghans themselves. Since then, conflict unfortunately continued and significant parts of the country remained contested or under Taliban control. After two decades, the Americans have now taken their long-predicted 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, but, like all our NATO allies, we believed that it was not feasible from the position we were in. Since 2009, America has deployed 98% of all weapons released from NATO aircraft in Afghanistan and, at the peak of the operation, 90,000 of the 132,000 troops on the ground were American. The West could not continue this mission without American logistics and US air power.

Countries around the world are now grappling with the enormity of this situation and we must adapt quickly. We have worked at speed to develop five strands to our approach. Our first and immediate focus must be on helping those to whom we have direct obligations, including UK nationals together with those Afghans who have assisted our efforts over the past 20 years. We do not know what the next few

[BARONESS EVANS OF BOWES PARK]

days or weeks will hold, but we are working intensively within government and with our international partners to do everything in our power to get them out of Afghanistan safely. We are deploying an additional 800 British troops on the ground to support the evacuation operation and I can assure the House that this will continue for as long as conditions at the airport allow—at the moment they are stable in comparison to some of the terrible scenes that we saw over the weekend and earlier this week. It is an extremely difficult task in the current circumstances and I know that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the bravery and commitment of our ambassador, Sir Laurie Bristow, our commander on the ground, Brigadier Dan Blanchford, and the entire British team in Kabul, who have been working round the clock saving hundreds of lives every day.

So far, we have secured the safe return of 306 UK nationals, while 2,052 Afghan nationals have been resettled as part of our programme and a further 2,000 applications have been completed, with many more being processed. We are actively seeking those who we believe are eligible but are as yet unregistered. We are also doing everything possible to accelerate the visas of the Chevening scholars, so that these brilliant Afghan students can come and study here.

At the same time, we are intensifying our efforts to evacuate those whom we can. We continue to urge the Taliban to ensure the protection of civilians and uphold human rights, especially those of women. We are committed to supporting the brave Afghan women who have risked their lives to help rebuild their country. We are closely monitoring the situation on the ground and exploring how we can best support at-risk women, human rights defenders, peacebuilders and women leaders to ensure that they do not suffer reprisals.

Secondly, we will intensify our efforts, with others, to protect Britain, our citizens and our interests from the threats of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. These concerns are shared by our international partners in NATO and the Security Council. As noble Lords will be aware, the Prime Minister will chair a virtual meeting of the G7 in the coming days to discuss how we can work together internationally.

Thirdly, the UK has provided £3.3 billion of aid funding since 2002, which has helped to improve the lives and rights of all Afghans, including women and minority groups. Life expectancy increased from 56 years in 2002 to 64 years in 2018. Some 9.6 million more children are now in school than in 2001 and 39% of children enrolled in schools are girls. Maternal mortality has almost halved and infant mortality has decreased faster than in any other low-income country since 2001.

We will now focus our efforts on increasing the resilience of the region and have called on the United Nations to lead a new humanitarian effort, bringing together the international community. To support this, we will double the amount of overseas aid that we had previously committed to Afghanistan this year, with new funding, taking this up to £286 million with immediate effect. We call on others to match this funding and to work together on a shared United Nations programme, which needs to begin in haste.

Fourthly, we need to ensure that there are safe and legal routes for those most in need. The Prime Minister has confirmed today that, in addition to those Afghans who have worked with us directly, we are committing to relocate another 5,000 this year through a new, bespoke resettlement scheme focusing on the most vulnerable, particularly women and children. We will keep this under review over future years, with the potential of accommodating up to 20,000 over the long term.

Finally, we must face the reality of the change in regime. In the past three days, the Prime Minister has spoken with the NATO and UN Secretaries-General and with President Biden, Chancellor Merkel, President Macron and Prime Minister Khan. We have been clear that it would be a mistake for any country to recognise the new Government in Kabul prematurely or bilaterally. Instead, those countries that care about Afghanistan's future should set 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 that it makes—on its attitude to terrorism, crime and narcotics, as well as humanitarian access, the rights of women and in particular the rights of girls to receive an education. Defending human rights will remain of the highest priority.

NATO and our allies will remain vigilant to the return of the terrorist threat from Afghanistan. Everyone has an interest in making sure that it does not again become a safe haven for terrorists. The Taliban must understand that they will be accountable for that and for any abuses that take place in the territory that they now control.

Alongside our core mission to prevent the continuation of the terrorist threat, we had higher goals 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 never previously known. Over the past 20 years, despite where we are today, we have made crucial progress and gains.

As I said at the outset, we will always owe a huge debt of gratitude to the 150,000 people who served in Afghanistan, in particular those 457 British troops who tragically lost their lives. For 20 years, they denied terrorists a safe haven to launch attacks against the United Kingdom, working with allies and Afghan security forces. They enabled development that has improved millions of lives and transformed Afghan society. We must now face the harsh reality that the Taliban control Afghanistan, but the world is watching what they do. We will use every diplomatic lever at our disposal, alongside our international partners, to protect these hard-fought rights. The Afghan people have suffered enough; the Taliban must not inflict even greater tragedy on them.

11.20 am

Baroness Smith of Basildon (Lab): My Lords, before I start, I concur with the Lord Speaker's and the Lord Privy Seal's comments about the tragic and terrible events that we saw in Plymouth. I also place on record our sadness at the loss of our two colleagues, Lord Smith and Viscount Simon.

Deep in my heart, I keep telling myself that I have done nothing bad. I might face consequences, but I guess that is the price that we pay for trying to make the world a little better. Those brave and understated comments in an interview by Rangina Hamidi, the Afghan Education Minister, who spoke for women and girls across Afghanistan and for all those who spoke out and fought against the Taliban and for human rights and democracy, that they now fear for their future, and even their lives, shames us. The confidence and courage shown by Rangina and other women who stepped forward to play such important roles in civic life—in politics, education, medicine and business—have now been replaced by dread and fear.

I welcome that Parliament has been recalled following these shocking and tragic events, but the scale and the urgency of this tragedy, this catastrophe, means that it should have been sooner. The urgency with which our Government, with others, need to act is desperately evident. As disturbing news emerged of the Taliban's staggering advances, it was clear that the predictions of those responsible for this exit strategy were not just wildly optimistic but devastatingly wrong. With the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary both on holiday as Taliban militants entered Kabul, it seems that, even in these final hours, they were oblivious to the unfolding catastrophe.

To fail to prepare for even the possibility of a swift Taliban resurgence is a strategic failure of historic proportions. There is no doubt that, as western forces withdrew on such a hard deadline, Afghan confidence and spirit crumbled as the Taliban seized the obvious opportunities. As recently as 8 July, during questions on his Statement, our Prime Minister committed to maintaining the British embassy in Kabul. That commitment lasted just a few short weeks. Having bravely sought to rebuild their country, the reality now is a cruel and tragic situation for the people in Afghanistan.

We must pay tribute to the work of our military over the past 20 years, including the Members and staff of this place and the other House. It is a mistake to view our military presence since 2001 only as a failure, but it will clearly now be overshadowed by a withdrawal that has returned Afghanistan to chaos. Our military ensured that the people of Afghanistan enjoyed freedoms and rights that seemed a distant prospect two decades ago. They made a difference. Critical advances were made in denying terrorists a safe haven, in supporting the building of the institutions needed in the country, in the training and support of the Afghan military forces and, so importantly, in supporting the advancement of women's and girls' education and their rights in society.

As we have heard, that progress came at a high price: 457 of our service men and women lost their lives, and many thousands more and their families continue to endure physical and mental injury. More than 70,000 Afghan citizens also lost their lives. This makes this chaos all the harder to bear.

Our involvement was never intended to be open-ended. Since 2014, when our combat operations ceased while training and logistical support continued, it was always recognised that at some point it would be appropriate

to work with the Afghan Government on a managed and tactical departure. However, as I put it to the noble Baroness the Leader of the House on 12 July:

“Progress made is not ... the same as those gains being secured and irreversible.”—[*Official Report*, 12/7/21; col. 1551.]

The Biden Administration's decision followed the agreement between President Trump and the Taliban, not the Afghan Government, 18 months ago, so I asked the noble Baroness on 12 July about the “ongoing commitment to Afghanistan” and details of our engagement with the US Government prior to this decision being announced. I sought information about whether, at any stage, we had discussed alternative courses of action, warned of the dangers of the timescale or sought additional NATO support. Even at that stage, this outcome was not inevitable.

Did we ever seek to build any regional consensus that we had previously? I quote the Prime Minister's comments:

“we shall use every diplomatic and humanitarian lever to support Afghanistan's development and stability.” —[*Official Report*, Commons, 8/7/21; col. 1104.]

I ask what that meant in practice. Those questions were not answered, and perhaps that was wise, because clearly there was no satisfactory answer. It is not for today, but at some stage the Prime Minister must address these points.

Because there were no answers then, the situation now in Afghanistan is an international humanitarian and political crisis. With the Taliban firmly in control, reports are now emerging of militants searching door to door for individuals who have previously worked with British, US and NATO forces. Meanwhile, the World Food Programme is warning that over half the country's population is already in need of humanitarian assistance, and chaos continues for those trying to fly out of Kabul. I have nothing but praise for the British officials and troops doing their duty there. Shocking reports now also suggest that children in rural areas are already being targeted to marry soldiers, and others are being murdered for their opposition to the Taliban.

Three key areas now need to be addressed. First is the immediate humanitarian crisis. With thousands desperately trying to flee, we have seen horrific scenes at Kabul airport, showing the depth of fear of the Taliban, given its previous brutality and fundamentalism. We urgently need a generous British Afghanistan resettlement programme, open to interpreters, support staff, the media and others who are now at risk. However, the Government's sanctuary scheme shows that they have failed to plan for this eventuality and are now scrambling in an attempt to meet the scale of the challenge. Can the noble Baroness the Leader, or the Minister who is responding, confirm how the Government reached the figure of 20,000 and how it was decided that only a quarter of that number would be welcomed in the first year, given the immediate danger that so many will now be in? Having heard the Home Secretary on Radio 4 this morning, I had no sense that she understood the urgency that is needed.

We must use our role in multilateral institutions and work with other countries to push for the safe passage and protection of those at risk, such as women judges, students and journalists, including over 100 BBC staff based in Kabul. Few could not have been affected

[BARONESS SMITH OF BASILDON]

and dismayed by the reaction of Ben Wallace, the Defence Secretary, as he admitted that not all who were endangered through working with us can be brought to safety. We have an obligation to them.

The second area is the future of Afghanistan. Reports are mixed. While in Kabul, female journalists have remained on TV, but there are many other seriously disturbing reports. Others in your Lordships' House today will speak of their contacts with judges, teachers, students, politicians, aid workers, journalists and others who are under threat. We have heard of working women being forced home and told that they cannot return to their jobs and must wear the hijab. Many of these women were encouraged to speak out by us and other countries, and that makes them and their families more vulnerable. The Taliban has a history of female oppression and of brutality. Our hearts ache for the young women and girls who dream of an education and freedom to choose their own path in life, if that is then snatched away from them by a failure of political decision-making.

The third area is international efforts to protect against terrorism. We should be driven above all by our decency and responsibility to confront suffering, but we must also understand that, if we fail, Afghanistan could again breed extremism that poses a threat to us all. Al-Qaeda and other extremist Islamic groups are already present in Afghanistan, and the Taliban's takeover will be seen as a boost to militants elsewhere in the world. The way in which this withdrawal was carried out will do nothing to convince other countries that the West can be relied upon to stand shoulder to shoulder with them.

As we consider the future, we must affirm that the Taliban has not taken control through legitimate means, and our Government are right not to offer and provide official recognition. Attention must now turn to how the UK and likeminded allies respond, and the Government must find the courage to lead. We must now utilise our unique role, as the G7 president and a leading voice within the UN and NATO, and seek alliances to protect those at risk. While we must push for democratic and humane values to be maintained, we must also plan for a situation in which they are not. This means protecting those most at risk from harm.

Unfortunately, the Government's strategy so far has been fraught with hesitation, and the delayed arrival of the FCDO's rapid deployment team has left British soldiers and the small diplomatic team doing excellent work in the most difficult circumstances and conditions. We fully support the recent troop deployment, and the Government must now ensure that they are in Kabul and fully resourced to carry out their work. We must also review decisions that have been taken. I understand that, today, an announcement has been made about increased aid to Afghanistan—so we have to examine the impact of an almost 75% cut to this aid over the past three years. We should never take a short-sighted view of supporting those who most need our help.

In conclusion, for the people of Afghanistan, the past week has been in equal parts traumatic and devastating—but we should also recognise the incredible bravery shown by some in response. Just yesterday,

incredible images were circulated on social media of women protesters with placards on the streets of Kabul, but questions remain about whether the Taliban will continue to stand by if the eyes of the West turn away. The Taliban has taken control, but the final destiny of the country is yet to be seen. We cannot abandon Afghanistan and must use every available diplomatic route to stand up for the basic rights of all its citizens.

11.31 am

Lord Newby (LD): My Lords, I begin by joining others in expressing the sympathy of these Benches with all those affected by the Plymouth tragedy.

What a difference a month makes. On 8 July, following his excruciatingly complacent Statement on Afghanistan in the Commons, the Prime Minister confidently declared that

“there is no military path to victory for the Taliban.”—[*Official Report, Commons, 8/7/21; col: 1107.*]

On Monday this week, he blandly asserted that

“we've known for a long time this was the way things would go”.

These two statements say a lot about the Prime Minister and, in particular, his irresponsible habit of saying whatever is most convenient on the day to get himself out of a hole, with no regard for consistency—or indeed the truth. But they also say a lot about the casual way our Government have overseen the final chapter of our latest involvement in Afghanistan.

The words now being used most to summarise this chapter—“failure”, “panic”, “humiliation” and “betrayal”—barely do justice to the situation that the precipitate departure of western alliance forces have created in Afghanistan. Of course, the primary responsibility for the debacle rests with President Biden and it is no excuse for him or the Prime Minister—as he did on 8 July—to say:

“The international military presence in Afghanistan was never intended to be permanent”—[*Official Report, Commons, 8/7/21; col. 1104.*]

and, therefore, that it was inevitable that we would be withdrawing now.

The US has shown, most notably in Germany and South Korea, that it is willing, in certain circumstances, to station its troops in a foreign country for decades, if it thinks it necessary for regional and global strategy. It simply chose not to take the same view about Afghanistan. Time will tell whether international security will be jeopardised, as al-Qaeda, Islamic State and other terrorist groups now eye Afghanistan as potential future operational bases. There is no doubt that, for the population of Afghanistan, particularly women and girls, the return of the Taliban threatens a return to the Dark Ages—and this was preventable. The decision by the western allies to withdraw all forces brought it about, and it is to our shame.

No doubt China and Russia will be pointing out today that the US and NATO lack staying power and cannot be trusted long-term allies, and that the global influence of the US, the UK and NATO as a whole will be much diminished. Realisation of this new reality will be causing alarm across western capitals, but for the UK it is particularly chilling. For this complete and utter debacle has laid bare the hollowness of the Government's claims to be a global power. We may be

able, as a gesture, to send an aircraft carrier to the South China Sea, but we cannot act on our own in a real-life crisis such as Afghanistan.

The US did not even consult us when it decided on its final troop withdrawal timetable, and there is no indication that we even attempted to suggest that it had got it wrong. Perhaps the Prime Minister realised that there would not have been any point. Speaking to President Biden yesterday was good, but the horse had already bolted. With minimal influence in Washington, greatly reduced involvement and influence with our European partners, cuts in our most effective tool of soft power—the aid budget—a shrinking Army and a Navy incapable of independent action, the Government's promotion of “global Britain” is a sad delusion.

In the absence of any credible action, the Government have resorted to platitudes. On 8 July, the Prime Minister said:

“I hope that no one will leap to the false conclusion that the withdrawal of our forces somehow means the end of Britain's commitment to Afghanistan.”—[*Official Report, Commons, 8/7/21; col. 1104.*]

This week, he said that Afghanistan must not become a “breeding ground for terror”—but what does our current commitment amount to and what exactly do the Government intend to do to stop the country becoming a terrorist breeding ground? These are questions to which we now need clear and urgent answers.

In the months ahead, we will need to explore how all the western intelligence agencies were so off the pace as to the consequences of the troop withdrawals. Given the lead role that the UK—not the US—played in the Kabul security force, we have some particular soul searching to do in this respect. Most importantly, we will have to look afresh at a credible role for Britain in the world. How do we adjust to a situation in which our interests and those of the US may increasingly diverge? How do we rebuild links with our closest natural allies—our neighbours in Europe? We will have to work very hard to persuade much of the world that we can again become credible, reliable partners.

However, for today there are more pressing issues. The most important is how to respond to the humanitarian crisis. As the Government accept, the starting point must be to offer residency not only to interpreters who worked for our troops and their families but to any locally recruited staff who worked for our troops, for our embassy or on our aid effort, and who might now be at risk. More broadly, as a minimum, we should certainly resettle 20,000 Afghan refugees, as the Government now propose. We need to identify those most at risk of persecution, with a particular focus on women in public life, those who have set up girls' education schemes and other marginalised groups, and we should offer sanctuary to journalists, who are particularly under threat, starting with the 100 or so BBC staff in Kabul.

But we must move quickly. The threat to these people is urgent and we should certainly not limit our ambitions to taking just 5,000 refugees over the next 12 months. We should also move rapidly to resolve the status of the 3,000 Afghan asylum seekers already in the UK and make it clear that we will not return a single one to Afghanistan. We must work with allies to investigate the possibility of establishing a safe-passage

corridor for those who now wish to leave the country, and we need clearly to refocus and increase our aid to help deal with the immediate humanitarian crisis. The Foreign Secretary said yesterday that we have increased the aid budget to Afghanistan by 10%. Great—but, as we know, this is a small fraction of the cuts that have taken place since this Government came to power.

We need to stiffen the UN's resolve to remain in Afghanistan to co-ordinate the humanitarian effort. It has the trust of the Taliban, which we simply lack, and could now play a powerful humanitarian role. On broader issues of respect for human rights, the role of women and girls, and the re-establishment of terrorist camps in Afghanistan, we must accept that our direct leverage over the Taliban is extremely limited. We should, however, be asking our allies, particularly in the Gulf and Pakistan, to use the influence they undoubtedly have to hold the Taliban to the commitments it made yesterday in these areas.

It is difficult to imagine your feelings today if you served with our forces in Afghanistan or are a family member of a British soldier or airman who died in the conflict. How could you satisfy yourself that all that effort and suffering was not in vain? I do not believe that the Government can give a comforting answer to that question, but the least we can do now is to take every action, limited though that may be, to show that we have not ended our commitment to Afghanistan and that, more generally, we are finally prepared to accept a more realistic view of our role in the world. There are clear lessons to be learned from this disaster, and it is imperative that we learn them now.

11.41 am

Lord Judge (CB) [V]: My Lords, for me, the recriminations can wait: the urgent question is the humanitarian crisis. I want to take just one example of aspirations which have turned out to be based on paper-strong foundations which we in the western world have laid down.

A few years ago, when I was Lord Chief Justice, an international meeting was held in London for women judges from all over the world. The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hale of Richmond, was presiding over it. When five judges from Afghanistan answered the roll call, the entire meeting acclaimed their pioneering courage.

Today, we truly appreciate how much courage was indeed needed. There are just under 300 female judges and magistrates in Afghanistan. Today, you can forget about security of tenure, whether for women or for men: the rule of law has been shattered. My particular concern today is for the personal safety of every one of those women judges. To establish decent foundations in Afghanistan, on the basis of our support, each one of them had the temerity—from the point of view of the Taliban, the sinful effrontery—to sit in open public courts; contrary to sharia law, to sit in judgment over men, to give judgments against men, to pass sentence on men; and to imprison Taliban terrorists, murderers and rapists. All those men are now free and will dress up their revenge as a debt they owe to their God.

The peril those brave women are in is terrifying. They were our allies in the war against barbarism. We went into Afghanistan and have left Afghanistan because

[LORD JUDGE]

we act in accordance with our loyalty to our allies; we do not desert them. We must not desert those women—these allies who we have left behind.

11.43 am

The Archbishop of Canterbury [V]: My Lords, I look forward especially to hearing noble and gallant Lords, diplomats and others with local knowledge of Afghanistan. We rightly remember the courage, suffering and sacrifice over the past 20 years and the courage being shown currently by our ambassador and service-people in Afghanistan, together with their colleagues, and reporters.

When we look back, I remember a cathedral full for the funeral of a soldier: family and many colleagues silent in dignity, some wounded, mourning their loss. The failure we face today is not military or diplomatic—they did all they could—it is political. Recovery and hope will come to Afghanistan with our supporting commitment to the neediest and most desperate. We have proven capacities in soft as well as hard power. We owe an absolute, lavishly generous moral covenant to all those who are at risk because they served with us in Afghanistan or took seriously our frequently professed commitment to its future, women and girls included.

An Afghan refugee, now a UK citizen, said to me this week, “Families, in such times of trouble, belong together.” His words are not politics but humanity. This is about morals, not numbers. Will the Government confirm that their policy will reflect moral obligation and not be controlled by numbers?

In Pakistan, a country facing huge pressure, including from refugees, we must undertake dialogue and support, learning afresh the religious and cultural literacy which is essential to effective work. We must not put any groups there or in Afghanistan into a corner where they may be driven to greater extremism. The aid we offer must support dialogue, inspire hope and prepare reconciliation, and must be genuinely additional, not a transfer from other places of need. I ask the Government: will that be the case?

We must renew commitment to freedom of religion and belief everywhere, a point not much mentioned so far. That will count in Pakistan and Afghanistan for Christians and religious communities such as Shia, Hindus, Jains, Ahmadis and Sikhs. A WhatsApp from a Christian in Afghanistan yesterday asked for support there and in Pakistan. Memorably, he said, “I am willing to die for Jesus, but I do not want to die forgotten.”

This is a very bad time, especially for so many in Afghanistan and for those who serve there. It is a time for prayerful humility and for us to display generosity, virtue and courage. Rebuilding our reputation in such ways will give many others hope as well.

11.47 am

Lord King of Bridgwater (Con) [V]: My Lords, I am very pleased to follow the most reverend Primate and strongly agree with his remarks.

I start by paying a warm tribute, as have others, to the tremendous number of our forces, including colleagues in both Houses of Parliament, who have served during this long period, which has brought so many benefits

to the people of Afghanistan, and our great sadness that that some were not able to return. These recent events reminded me of my maiden speech nearly 20 years ago in your Lordships’ House, when we had just gone into Afghanistan. I had in my pocket the cap badge of my old regiment, which was the Somerset Light Infantry, and on its top is inscribed its battle honour, Jalalabad. Some may remember that there was a successful defence of Jalalabad, which had the duty of welcoming back the returning army from Kabul: 5,000 troops and 10,000 dependants. Your Lordships will remember that only one person arrived. Part of what contributed to that disaster was that six Afghan army regiments deserted during that tragic retreat. I said at the time that it was easy to get into Afghanistan, but often very difficult to get out. Obviously, I very much share that feeling now.

Having said that, the challenge is: what do we do? At the moment, it is difficult to know quite what the Taliban position is. It is all over the place, obviously itself extremely surprised at the speed with which this has happened. It has a PR spokesman offering rather more encouraging pictures, but it is still governed by a 20 year-old manifesto. The question now is what attitude it is going to take.

It is against that background that I particularly welcome the Statement by the Prime Minister today, with his determination to get the maximum international co-operation to make absolutely clear that the Afghan Government, the Taliban Government, now have to bring themselves up to date from their 20 year-old dreams and decide that, if they want to have any sort of relations with other countries in the world, they must start to bring themselves in line with what are the true interests of the people now in Afghanistan, which is very different from what it might have been 20 years ago. We must protect the changes that have happened, particularly for women and children.

There is so much to say in this situation but, to add another thing, while I welcome the announcement about giving more accommodation to desperate people seeking to escape from Afghanistan, we have to realise that the problem of mass migration of refugees has been yet further hijacked and increased by this terrific event that has happened. That will be a continuing challenge for us in the weeks, months and years ahead.

11.50 am

Lord Hain (Lab) [V]: My Lords, I endorse especially the points so ably made by my noble friend Lady Smith of Basildon. I was a junior Foreign Office Minister, first covering Afghanistan from July 1999 until January 2001, and then, from June 2001, was Europe Minister during 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan to eradicate al-Qaeda’s base. I am therefore implicated in what Tom Tugendhat, Conservative MP and chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, described as Britain’s “biggest foreign policy disaster since Suez”,

questioning what on earth so many British soldiers, coalition forces and Afghans bravely fought for—and sacrificed their lives for.

We must now find ways to incentivise the Taliban—and, yes, that includes engaging with them alongside regional powers like China and Iran—so that they are discouraged

from returning to their bad old ways, including their oppression of women and girls. A United Nations panel reports that the Taliban have kept up a close relationship with al-Qaeda, permitting them to conduct training and deploy fighters alongside its forces. Something similar may be true of ISIS.

But experience from Northern Ireland—hard learnt at bloody cost to life and limb—shows that you will fail if you treat groups like the Taliban as pariahs. As Tony Blair's chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, explains in his excellent book *Talking to Terrorists*, you have to negotiate with them, offering economic incentives and tough deterrents to respect international norms and human rights. The costly nation-building, democracy-building strategy of the West over these past 20 years has failed abysmally. A fundamental mistake of US-UK policy from the outset was not accommodating the Pashtun, the biggest group in Afghanistan, from where Taliban power comes. Instead of cultivating only Afghan forces and individuals amenable to the United States from 2001, instead of occupying a country that has always rejected foreign invaders—from Britain in the 1830s to the Soviets in the 1980s—surely after 9/11 the West should have negotiated a deal to remove al-Qaeda with the Taliban and other Afghani leaders.

And, yes, the story might have been different if the US and UK focus on Afghanistan after 2002-03 had not been diverted by the calamitous invasion of Iraq. We all share the shame, both the Labour Government in which I was proud to serve and, since 2010 the Conservatives—including Liberal Democrats when in coalition—in our betrayal of the millions of Afghans. It is no good just finger jabbing at Biden or Bush, at Johnson or Blair; there must instead be a proper reckoning by this Parliament and by Congress about the real lessons of our common culpability in this utter catastrophe.

11.53 am

Baroness Smith of Newnham (LD): My Lords, like the noble and learned Lord, Lord Judge, I do not think that today is the day for recriminations. The time for reckoning, as the noble Lord, Lord Hain, has talked about, should come later, at a time when, I trust, there will be a full inquiry into British activity with our NATO partners in Afghanistan. Today is the time to think about urgent action.

In the last few days, the situation in Afghanistan has seen the clocks go back 20 years or, for women, several centuries. Women and girls are now in a profoundly vulnerable situation—not just the judges, about whom we heard so movingly and effectively from the noble and learned Lord, Lord Judge, but the wives and daughters of those who have worked with NATO forces or with NGOs. It is absolutely vital that we urgently find a way of getting out as many people as possible.

We have heard today the suggestion of 20,000 refugees. That is great, but only 5,000 this year is woefully inadequate. We have, apparently, already brought in 3,000 interpreters and their families. What can the Government tell us about all the other people who need to get out of Afghanistan and brought over as a matter of urgency? This is not just interpreters but the cleaners, catering staff and others who worked for the

Army and in the embassy—locally engaged staff who were sometimes employed directly by the embassy, sometimes not. The provisions in place are for those who were employed but, occasionally, people lost their jobs perhaps because they had smoked cannabis. Government Ministers do not necessarily lose their jobs when they admit to having taken drugs; surely these people should be given every opportunity to leave Afghanistan.

Can the Minister tell us, in responding, what contact the FCDO has had with interpreters who are still in Afghanistan and what offers have been given in recent days to people who maybe do not have passports? Surely there is a need for the Government and Home Office to understand that some of the people we need to bring out of Afghanistan will need to come without the normal paperwork. Our ambassador is doing a fantastic job, as I understand it, in making sure that paperwork is expedited, but we need to ensure that people are not being kept back because of issues to do with petty bureaucracy.

Does the FCDO have any idea of the number of people who are vulnerable because they have worked for the UK and our allies? Is it working on a figure of far more than 5,000 people? The numbers are not sufficient. The RAF is doing a fantastic job at the moment, but can we assume that those numbers of maybe 1,000 people a day can go on at least until the end of August and that we will deal with the debt that we owe to people who have serviced our service men and women? In concluding, I of course pay tribute to our service men and women for everything that they have done. It was not in vain because, for 20 years, we gave the people of Afghanistan hope.

11.58 am

Lord Dannatt (CB): My Lords, in the time allowed in this very welcome debate, I wish to make three points.

First, notwithstanding his attempted explanation on Monday, the manner and timing of the Afghan collapse is the direct result of President Biden's decision to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of 9/11. At a stroke, he has undermined the patient and painstaking work of the last five, 10, 15 years to build up governance in Afghanistan, develop its economy, transform its civil society and build up its security forces. The people had a glimpse of a better life, but that has been torn away. With US forces withdrawing, other NATO allies, including ourselves, had no option but to leave too, denying the Afghan national army the technical and training support that it needed and the moral support of friends who encouraged them to take the fight to the Taliban. Until a few weeks ago, the Taliban was being contained and may even have been persuaded over time that a military victory was impossible and a negotiated settlement was the better course. Those possibilities are now a closed chapter of history, an opportunity lost, and the world's western superpower is looking enfeebled. The only glimmer of hope today is that the Taliban of 2021 is not the Taliban of 2001.

Secondly, amid the chaos of Kabul and its airport, I sincerely hope that all those who have stood with us, as interpreters or locally employed civilians, will have

[LORD DANNATT]

the opportunity to seek safety in this country. Many in your Lordships' House joined many senior retired military commanders in co-signing an open letter urging the Government to be more generous towards this group of people, and to do so quickly. Frankly, this whole discussion has dragged on for two or three years on the back burner, hence the need for that open letter. I sincerely hope that the operation now in progress in and around Kabul international airport will succeed in evacuating our entitled British nationals and the Afghan citizens who worked for us. I would be grateful for an assurance from the Minister in responding on the Government's commitment to our Afghan civilian employees.

Thirdly, I strongly believe that the whole campaign in Afghanistan should be the subject of a public inquiry, to be convened in the coming months—not another expensive and drawn-out Chilcot-type inquiry, but one with appropriate terms of reference. Its scope should include the reasons that took us into Afghanistan in 2001—probably the least contentious part of the inquiry; the debate around nation-building in 2002 and beyond; the background to the decision to go into Iraq in 2003 and its effect on the Afghanistan campaign; the decision-making process that placed the UK in the lead of the new operation in southern Afghanistan in 2006, and the conduct of that campaign. It must also include our relations with our allies, principally the US and NATO, the discussions around the ending of combat operations in 2014 and our residual training and mentoring role that ended so abruptly with President Biden's decision to withdraw by 9/11 2021. Some might say that such an inquiry is not needed, but I am convinced that it is: it should focus particularly on our strategic decision-making at both the political and the senior military levels and, crucially, their interface. I would be grateful for the Minister's comment on this proposition.

12.01 pm

Lord Hammond of Runnymede (Con): My Lords, as a former Defence Secretary, I pay my own tribute to the 457 British service personnel who lost their lives in Afghanistan and the many hundreds more who suffered life-changing injuries. I know that many people will be asking whether their sacrifice was in vain, and I want to assure them that it was not. For nearly 20 years, we held the ground in Afghanistan; we denied that territory to Islamist terrorist extremists who would have attacked our populations using the safe haven of Afghanistan. Many other benefits flowed, but that was our primary purpose, and the mission was a success in those terms. I salute the heroism and commitment of our service personnel and I record the huge debt of gratitude that we owe them for keeping us safe over that long period.

What has happened now is a catastrophic failure of western policy, and, more particularly, US policy because, as my noble friend has already set out, whatever the romantics tell us, once the US decided to leave, it was inevitable that no other partner in the coalition could safely deploy modest numbers of troops effectively in the theatre. The die was cast. I confess that I do not understand the reason for this decision. Since the end of combat operations in 2014 and the drawdown of

forces, we were deploying relatively small numbers of troops at relatively small cost and delivering a hugely leveraged effect on the ground in Afghanistan, denying space to terrorists to organise and excluding our strategic challenges from exploiting the situation in that country. It might have been messy, but it was a whole lot better than the alternative that could have been.

When I listen to the US President, I cannot help reaching the conclusion that this decision was made out of a sense of political tidy-mindedness: we need to close a file; we need to draw a line; it has gone on for too long. I fear that that tidy-mindedness is a western disease that is unsuited to modern asymmetric military conflict, which is messy and enduring. Our strategic adversaries understand that—they thrive on messy compromise, ambiguous outcomes and frozen conflicts. The western alliance has brought this catastrophe on itself to save a very small-scale deployment.

Today, the victims are Afghans, particularly Afghan women and girls. Tomorrow, however, the victims might be our citizens if our streets once again echo to the sound of Afghan-based terrorism. Let us now discharge our obligations to those who have worked closely with us in Afghanistan, but let us also learn the lessons of this debacle. Let us make it clear that we, for ourselves at least, are prepared for long-term low-intensity deployment of our troops to reinforce local militaries and reasonably friendly governments in order to deliver relative stability. We will be able to do that only with US support. Mr Biden said on Saturday that he had learned that there was never a good time to withdraw US forces. I fear he was right and that that is the price of being a superpower.

12.05 pm

Lord Blunkett (Lab) [V]: My Lords, I pay tribute, as others have done, to our brave men and women, including those aid workers and people of Afghanistan who have given so much over the last 20 years. What has happened over recent weeks is a blow to internationalism, to global security and, I fear, to future interventions on security and humanitarian grounds which would and will be necessary.

Some 20 years ago, as Home Secretary, I was being interviewed by Jim Naughtie on the "Today" programme when we went over to John Simpson, who was entering Kabul with the Northern Alliance, supported by our troops. Last Sunday, that was completely reversed and with it went 20 years not just of sacrifice but of an international effort to ensure that the world would be a safer place.

I have two questions for the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad. First, will the Government reverse the decision not to replace James Brokenshire as a dedicated Security Minister? We need that position filled more than ever at this moment. Secondly, and reflecting on the words of my noble friend Lady Smith of Basildon, will the Government now consider setting aside those elements of the immigration and borders legislation that preclude support for, and the proper processing of refugee status for, those who do not have full documentation? It would be ridiculous—I reflect what has been said about the Home Secretary's interview—if people, not just in the months but in the years ahead, were refused

their rights as refugees simply because they did not have documentation. It is either not available to them or had to be destroyed in order to save their life or well-being.

I introduced the gateway programme all those years ago, which is now renamed the resettlement programme. It is crucial that there be a safe corridor, but it is also, as the most reverend Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury said this morning, critical that we engage with Pakistan. Anyone who read *Charlie Wilson's War* will understand precisely why the Taliban retained the capacity to be able to sweep aside the Afghan forces over recent months. Pakistan has played both a constructive and a very destructive role over the last 20 years. Now is the time to engage with it, but it will take a combined effort across the globe to ensure that we put right the terrible disaster that has befallen the people of Afghanistan over recent days. It could easily be reflected in a resurgence of the jihadists, who have rejoiced at what has happened.

Today is a very sad day for us all, but there is something to learn from and reflect on in terms of our humanitarian commitment and our willingness to re-engage with security.

12.08 pm

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem (LD) [V]: My Lords, I join with others in their expressions of sympathy and support and the tributes that we have already heard from all sides of your Lordships' House. Once again, I declare my interest as an ambassador for HALO, a charity based in Scotland that is currently engaged with the clearance of mines and unexploded ordnance in Afghanistan. HALO employs some 2,400 local staff and, notwithstanding recent events, I am advised that it intends to continue with that necessary humanitarian work.

I shall never forget the sight of hundreds of Afghan men seeking to climb on to the outside of a moving military aircraft in the despairing and irrational belief that it would provide escape. They were driven, no doubt, by the recollection of the pitiless and savage regime presided over by the Taliban, with its particular subjugation of women and girls. But now we are told that the fundamentalists have become pragmatists, but always within their own definition of Islamic principles. We shall wait and see, but we know that, already, there is increasing anecdotal evidence of a return to the old ways, with house-to-house searches for individuals.

I want to look a little wider. As the people of Afghanistan are sorely troubled, the two principal advocates of the rules-based system are being mocked in Beijing and Moscow. To return to the point made by my noble friend Lord Newby, what price global Britain now? How would the British Government now define the special relationship? The harsh truth is that we have lost influence, trust and reputation. Of course the status quo could not last for ever, but why were we not aware of the disillusionment with the Afghan Government? Why were we not aware of the corruption and mismanagement in the Afghan forces, and of the lack of confidence among them when they were denied support from the army and other forces of the United States?

Let me finish with some questions. Did either the Trump Administration or the Biden Administration tell the British Government of their intentions in advance, and, if they did in either case, what representations did we make to them? Faced with the ineptitude of Trump and the determination of Biden, just what influence did our Prime Minister really have? We are entitled to know.

12.12 pm

Baroness Manningham-Buller (CB) [V]: My Lords, in September 2001, shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, when I was deputy head of MI5, I flew to Washington with the head of MI6 and the head of GCHQ to discuss with our American colleagues what more our intelligence community should do to counter the threat. The threat was not new but the scale and audacity of the attacks were, although we had been expecting a major attack by AQ for some time. The decision was about al-Qaeda, its base in Afghanistan and its close relationship with the Taliban. I do not remember any discussion on Iraq. Subsequently, there were divergences of policy and approach but at that stage we were as one; indeed, most countries in the world wanted to support America.

Twenty years on, I could weep. Has all that effort been in vain? Were all those lives lost and lives ruined for naught? In this, I agree with what the Lord Privy Seal and the noble Lord, Lord Hammond of Runnymede, have said. In one respect, it certainly has not been wasted. I say this to dispirited veterans and to grieving families of servicemen who lost their lives in Afghanistan: remember that no terrorist attacks have been launched from Afghanistan for the last two decades, as far as I know. But now I wonder whether my hope that progress in helping Afghanistan move from its medieval past might last. I recall bitterly the comment of al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's deputy, made five years in, to the effect that this time not even Dr Brydon would get home. That should remind us of the patience, long-term nature and sense of history that the West rarely shows but which the Taliban and their supporters have.

Others in this debate will cover much more eloquently than I can the acute humanitarian crisis, the strategic implications, including for NATO, and the need to begin, when appropriate—here, I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Hain—a dialogue with the Taliban, however unpalatable, to explore incentives for good behaviour. Others suggest that they have changed. I am afraid that I am sceptical, but we shall see.

I end by warning of two major security concerns. First, there is inspiration. The Taliban victory and its rout of western forces, as it appears, will inspire and embolden those who wish to promote jihad against the West. Events over the last few days show that the success of this ideology is possible and that will excite, encourage and spur terrorists. Secondly, on safe space, even if we believe the Taliban when they say that they will not allow terrorists to operate from their territory, I doubt they could stop that happening. The border with Pakistan is porous and its Government supportive of the Taliban. There is plenty of room to recruit, plot and train a new generation of terrorists. I wish I could end on a more positive note, and maybe my pessimism is misjudged, but I expect more terrorism directed against the West, based on extreme Islamist ideology.

12.16 pm

Lord Howard of Lympne (Con) [V]: My Lords, I believe that we were right to intervene in Afghanistan and wrong to withdraw. I say “we”, but of course the decisions to intervene and to withdraw were made by the Americans. We could not have gone it alone. The original decision to intervene was a reaction to the attack on America, the 20th anniversary of which we commemorate in a few weeks’ time. More recently, the intervention has been in response to an invitation from the legitimate Government of that country to help them overcome a barbaric insurrection which posed a terrible threat to its people, especially its women, and to the welfare of the wider international community. If the values of what we loosely call the West are to have any substance, we were right to respond to that invitation. I believe it justified the lives, the blood and the sacrifice of so many of our young men and women, and those of our allies, to whom I pay heartfelt tribute.

The responsibility for the decision to withdraw rests with President Biden. Up to now, many of us have been rather impressed with the president’s performance in his first few months in office, although that may in large part be due to the relief at the absence of his unlamented predecessor. But I am afraid that President Biden’s decision to withdraw from Afghanistan is, and will be seen by history as, a catastrophic mistake which may well prove to be the defining legacy of his presidency.

It is a mistake which will, I fear, have calamitous consequences: first, for the people of Afghanistan, and especially its women; secondly, for the countries, including European countries, to which many of these people will seek to flee; thirdly, for the security of ourselves and our friends and allies, who will once again be vulnerable to attack from that country. It has been widely reported that those loyal to al-Qaeda and Islamic State have been fighting alongside the Taliban. They will expect their support to be rewarded.

Fourthly, and in some ways perhaps most importantly of all, it fatally undermines the credibility of any assurance of support—past, present or future—that we in the West offer to those who need it. Any future promises will be in debased coinage. These are dark days for those of us who believe in the values of what we loosely call western civilization. They mark a significant staging point in its decline. If that decline is to be reversed, or at least arrested, we are in dire need of statesmanship of a very high order. Sadly, that statesmanship is today conspicuous largely by its absence.

12.19 pm

Lord West of Spithead (Lab) [V]: My Lords, there is little doubt that after the rapid success of NATO’s original invasion of Afghanistan, which smashed al-Qaeda and threw the remnants into the Pakistan FATA, we should have withdrawn and left those in Afghanistan to cobble together some form of settlement, however shambolic it might have been, as some of us said at the time.

We did not; rather, we allowed things to drift. The multitude of errors and changed strategic goals in our Afghan policy leading to where we are today is water under the bridge. A blame game at this stage will not help, but there needs to be a detailed assessment of

decisions and actions over the last 20 years when events have stabilised. What is unsurprising is that, with the US predicting a Taliban takeover in months, there was a collapse in Afghan army morale. If you tell people they are going to lose, they generally do.

In the recent months it has become clear that large numbers of Islamist fighters of various persuasions, including al-Qaeda, Daesh and the Chechens, have joined the Taliban ranks. The international community cannot allow Afghanistan to become a haven for global terrorists again. It needs to be made clear to the Taliban that, if ever Afghanistan harbours international terrorists and training camps, as it did prior to 9/11, NATO will return to smash them and those responsible for allowing them to flourish before withdrawing again.

The malign influence of Pakistan and in particular the ISI should be highlighted. The ISI has been responsible for a great deal of the chaos in Afghanistan. We should make it clear to the Pakistan Government that, should Afghanistan become a haven for terrorists and they are implicated, fiscal and diplomatic action will be taken against them.

Military withdrawal means that our influence is limited. No matter how much we might loathe the Taliban’s treatment of women and its narco-economy, the return of allied troops to try to restore the status quo ante is a non-starter and should not be contemplated.

12.22 pm

Lord Empey (UUP) [V]: My Lords, my party leader Doug Beattie MLA and my colleagues Andy Allen MLA and Councillor Ryan McCready all served on the ground in Afghanistan. Captain Beattie was awarded a military cross. My colleague Andy Allen lost both his legs and a large amount of his sight and hearing, and he suffered other damage. Councillor McCready was wounded by shrapnel from a Taliban grenade.

All of them and my other colleagues are disgusted by events. The questions they are asking are these. Why did the withdrawal need to happen with such speed, especially at this time, during the fighting season, thus helping the Taliban? Did the US and UK have clear evidence that Afghan security forces could go it alone? Is there even agreement on the size of the Afghan forces? Why were all our top officials, including the Prime Minister and the Chief of the Defence Staff, so ill-informed only a few days ago? What are the consequences for minorities such as Christians, left abandoned by the West?

I join the noble Lord, Lord Dannatt, in stating the need for an inquiry, whether through Parliament or another mechanism. We need to understand why we had such a spectacular intelligence and strategic policy failure. What is the ongoing role of NATO? Is it a one man band where the US alone decides what to do and where to do it? The inquiry must look at all of this.

The consequence is that dictators around the world will call our bluff. As a nation, our bark is worse than our bite. Our critics can now say, sadly with justification, that there is no promise we will not break, there is no cause we will not ultimately betray and there is no principle we will not abandon. We are not even prepared to stand up and fight for our own citizens wronged by a foreign power; I refer to Libya, where we still fail

even to seek justice for our people. A thug like Lukashenko can laugh at our threat of sanctions on him and his regime. We talked tough on Syria and encouraged the local population to resist Assad, but US red lines on chemical weapons were crossed with no consequences for the regime and Putin walked in and filled the vacuum.

We continue, despite some encouraging content in the integrated review, to hollow out our Armed Forces, and we have a fleet of destroyers that are not fit for proper service. That needs to be addressed. All the messages that we are sending out are wrong. In the end, we need to be able to match our rhetoric with ability and determination. The Taliban has taught us one thing: determination and zeal mean a lot more than fancy weapons. As a nation we must work to ensure that our bark and our bite match up and must be taken seriously.

12.25 pm

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, in representing a military barracks in my former constituency during the military phase of our operation in Afghanistan and personally knowing bereaved families, I admire as others do the great sacrifices our service men and women have made. But it is our duty to ask questions, however awkward, difficult or uncomfortable they may be for our country.

The Government told the International Relations and Defence Committee on page four of their response to our Select Committee report on Afghanistan that:

“UK forces lead assurance of security in the capital, Kabul, working alongside NATO Allies. This is vital for the security of the Afghan government and diplomatic presence”.

When the Taliban were making manoeuvres and it was obvious that they were approaching the capital, why were the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary absent? Did UK forces advise the Government that there was a likelihood that the capital would fall? Were contingency plans put in place for what we are now seeing happen in a chaotic manner? Why did the Government not indicate what those contingency plans may be?

The assumptions underlying the integrated review and even the defence Command Paper published on 30 July, plus the warnings from the head of MI5 and others, including Ministers, in response to our committee report, range from security from terrorism to the fact that the illicit trade in heroin from Afghanistan represents 95% of all heroin on UK streets. This will be used strategically by the Taliban and is now a direct national security threat. Will the Government now urgently update the integrated review and defence Command Paper, taking into consideration the new realities?

Regarding development and people, there were many warnings that there would be consequences of a 43% reduction in UK aid to Afghanistan for 2020-21, with further cuts being planned. Can the Minister, the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad, confirm that the position is the same as when he told the committee that UK support for Afghanistan was conditional on the Taliban not forming part of the Government? Is that still the position of the Government? Given the fact that half of UK aid went directly into Afghan Government funds, which are now defunct, is this aid to be new money, as the Leader of the House indicated? Is it not simply a reallocation of what had been proposed for

three years of direct UK government support and has now been reallocated to the United Nations? On people, the government resettlement scheme does not permit third-country applications under law. That means that those who have fled to other countries from Afghanistan are not currently able to apply for UK resettlement. Will this now be changed by the Government in legislation?

Finally, it is no surprise to me, with the great difficulties that we have seen in Tunisia, that it was reported that the ISIS newsletter has sent out messages around that world that, for Libya, Tunisia and now Afghanistan, democracy does not work. Very simply, we must reassert that if the UK is committed to supporting open, tolerant and democratic approaches, we must publicly and openly work with our Gulf allies and the United Nations to offer as much leverage as is now possible. If there is to be dialogue and practical humanitarian support within Afghanistan, we must use all the allies, as uncomfortable as it may be for Pakistan, and ensure that we have a clear and public UK presence.

12.29 pm

Lord Jay of Ewelme (CB): My Lords, all of us involved over the last 30 years in one way or another in policy towards Afghanistan will feel pretty gutted at the events of the last few days. Many of us have seen at first hand the courage and commitment of our soldiers, diplomats, aid workers and others and, of course, of the Afghan men and women with whom we worked. There will, of course, come a time to look at how we got to where we are now—and, indeed, the circumstances in which military intervention may be justified. In my view, today is not the day to do that. But I do hope that out of all this will come a foreign policy based more on cold realism and less on rhetoric.

I will make three points. First, we must, if at all possible, maintain an embassy in Kabul, provided, of course, that our people are safe. Without it, we lose influence and understanding—and neither of those can we afford. I hope that Laurie Bristow, for whom I have the highest admiration, can stay. Can the Minister give us any assurance on this, at least of the Government's intention?

Secondly, we must offer and seek to deliver—not easy, I know—humanitarian aid. Thirdly, we must work with others—the EU, the US, China, Russia, Afghanistan and Afghanistan's neighbours to try to ensure a stable Afghanistan that is not a breeding ground for terrorists. There is surely a common interest here and the UN will have a key role to play, as the noble Baroness mentioned in her opening speech.

No one knows what sort of Taliban regime will emerge from the present crisis, nor how coherent it will be. With others, we may be able to affect things; on our own we will not. It will be a hard slog and it will be unglamorous, but it may just make a difference, and we owe it to those who have given so much.

12.32 pm

Lord Robathan (Con) [V]: My Lords, there have been some very good and very well-informed speeches, which I cannot emulate. I shall just make three points. First, I join others in paying tribute to the 457 British

[LORD ROBATHAN]

personnel who died in this campaign and the many more who were maimed for life. They were brave young men—and three women—who were doing their duty, serving our country and the Government and Parliament in which we sit. What do we say to their parents, their spouses and their children, who will be asking whether they died in vain? Well, we shall see, but this is heart-breaking.

Secondly, we should not underestimate the disaster and humiliation that this has been. It is on a par with the first Afghan campaign, which humiliated the East India Company and then the British Empire when Dr Brydon returned alone from Elphinstone's army. This is a humiliation of the West, of NATO, of us, of course, but especially of the US—which, apparently, leads the free world, or so we are told. President Biden said that “America is back”. Robert Gates, Defense Secretary to the Administrations of both George W Bush and Barack Obama, said in his memoirs that Biden had been on the wrong side of every national security issue of the past 20 years. I agree very much with what my noble friend Lord Hammond—who I worked under as Minister for the Armed Forces—said on this point. The humiliation and disaster of the West is appalling. The West is seen as an unreliable ally.

Thirdly, the consequences are that the West's values of freedom and democracy have been trashed. China is now taunting Taiwan. Russia is cosying up to the Taliban already. Iran will be celebrating. Pakistan has questions to answer about its role in support of the Taliban. We have never understood Afghanistan. It is more than a foreign country; it is totally different. It is a tribal country. It has tribal elders. It has a religion that we do not entirely understand. It can be very backward and has some barbaric practices. Valley by valley it is different.

Expansion of the mission in 2005 was a grave error. We became an occupying force and our soldiers became a target, similar to 1840 to 1842. We have spent billions in military spending and billions on aid, which is now wasted. Let us not delude ourselves: it has been wasted. Nor should we willingly give more aid to Afghanistan unless we can ring-fence it—but I do not think we can. It will go straight into the pockets of the Taliban.

We need to focus on restoring the standing of the West, of NATO and of Britain and our values around the world. We need to show confidence in our values, our history and our society. We should be proud of our history and not apologise the whole time, caving in to incredibly ignorant left-wing activists such as Black Lives Matter elsewhere. Our enemies sense our collapse in confidence and our weakness. The USA, in particular, seems to have given up on its leadership of the free world, and the idea that the Taliban will be interested in dialogue with the West is for the birds. This is a disaster, and totalitarian regimes in now in the ascendancy.

12.35 pm

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen (Lab) [V]: My Lords, over two decades, NATO and those who served with ISAF did much to reduce the terrorist threat to the people of this country. Those who served can be

justifiably proud. We were always going to eventually leave Afghanistan to the Afghan people, but, instead of a conditions-based, gradual withdrawal, this shambolic, reckless and disorganised retreat will weaken NATO and the West, strengthen our adversaries and betray those Afghans who trusted us, especially girls and women.

But hand wringing in debates such as this is not going to help the future. First, we need to prepare for an increased terrorist threat here, as the noble Baroness, Lady Manningham-Buller, has just warned. Secondly, we need to rebuild the regional coalition to hold the Taliban to account for what it is saying today. Thirdly, we need to learn the lessons of this mission, especially about conducting a distant military operation with an inadequate, half-hearted determination to win it.

When I was NATO Secretary-General, I repeatedly warned the NATO countries and the wider world that we have to go to Afghanistan or Afghanistan will come to us. I greatly fear that that is just what is going to happen.

12.37 pm

Baroness Ludford (LD): My Lords, I am not going to talk about the foreign policy, military or security aspects of the catastrophe in Afghanistan. I am not equipped to do so, and many others in this debate are, not least the noble Lord, Lord Robertson, who has just spoken.

My only inquest question is to ask why a plan for refugees emerged only last night and why there was no contingency scheme ready to announce an action well before Kabul fell. The Prime Minister told MPs this morning that it is not true that the UK Government were unprepared. Well, it looks like it. Why is the process for issuing visas protracted and bureaucratic? Much as one can admire the heroism of our ambassador Laurie Bristow in administering visas at the airport, this is not the image of simplified and fast-tracked applications and evacuation that one would expect.

I second what others have said about the UK aid budget, but I also urge the Government to scale up our support for the UN's refugee agency, the UNHCR. In 2020, Germany individually gave almost three times as much as our \$135 million, which was not much more than what was given by much smaller countries such as Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands—and all those contributions were on top of the EU contribution of \$0.5 billion. Resources, as well as diplomatic influence, must also be used to support neighbouring countries to keep their borders open, in order to provide safe havens to refugees fleeing Afghanistan—as they have long done.

The Home Secretary has announced a UK Afghan resettlement scheme of 20,000 over a number of years, drawing comparisons with the seven-year scheme for Syrians. But that figure needs to be a start rather than a cap, and it needs to be front loaded as an immediate response. The Prime Minister says that the Taliban is allowing the evacuation to go ahead and that we just need to get people out while we can. Why are the Government not simply responding to need and to the moral imperative that others have referred to? Chris Bryant MP asked in the other place:

“What are the 15,000 meant to do? Hang around and wait to be executed?”

Good question—what is the answer?

It would certainly be welcome if the Government committed to a resettlement scheme that was long-term, sustainable, and an embedded part of policy—not just dropped when the news cycle changed. Then, a target figure of, say, 10,000 a year, would make sense. What funding—genuinely new funding—will there be for local councils to house, support and integrate those refugees, without placing even more strain on their overstretched budgets?

I will not repeat what others have said about the ARAP scheme, which must be expanded to contractors. We must also not forget families. Reuniting families and bringing those in Afghanistan with family in the UK here to safety must be a top priority. I draw attention to the Bill that I have in progress on refugee family reunion, which has its Second Reading on 10 September, and I invite more speakers.

12.40 pm

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger (Con) [V]: My Lords, this crisis in Afghanistan is a terrible disaster, not just for Afghanistan but for all the international community. It was predictable and preventable, sweeping away 20 years' work and the money spent there with, of course, the tragic loss of life, both military and civilian, as well as life-changing injuries. The scenes from Kabul are chilling: the panic, the chaos, the fear. The immediate reaction has to be to help on the humanitarian front, and I commend the Foreign Office and our military for all their outstanding work.

We must act fast—there are so many in danger. The world has ignored that, for some time now, the Taliban has been targeting women, Hazaras, university graduates and those who worked in the military and for the Government. As well as extracting people to the West, can we not persuade countries in the region to help, as was the case with Syria? The Taliban now says that it has changed, but look at the atrocities it has recently perpetrated on the ground: hands being severed, people hanged at the entrance to cities, young girls seized to be married to fighters, and other barbarous acts. In Kabul, I understand, prominent government officials' doors have been spray-painted. This does not bode well.

There are so many questions. Was the US announcement to withdraw unilateral, and if so, why did the UK not speak out then? Was there intelligence that this would happen? How is the Taliban so well organised, so well equipped, so well informed, and so logistically able? This calls for an inquiry to understand better why the West has so comprehensively failed. Now that there is to be a transitional government, please can the UK ensure that we have another Security Council debate, perhaps to put in a UN peacekeeping force to ensure that there is an end to violence and human rights abuse? Can we try to get a human rights observer into every province in the country?

I welcome the announcement about aid, but can we ensure that any given to the Afghan Government will be conditional on ending violence and ensuring that human rights are upheld? Most at risk are the courageous women of Afghanistan; we encourage them to challenge their society and come forward to take their place in public life. I received an email this morning, which said: "In the past two days, different groups have

visited my house three times. They took my house, my vehicles, the safety weapons of my guards." This woman is terrified, and it is not just high-profile women in danger; it is illiterate women and widows. All the women are in fear of their lives and will lose their freedom.

While I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement yesterday, can we ensure that it includes vulnerable women peacebuilders, supported through the UK's work on women, peace and security? How will the UK's humanitarian response deliver for women and girls? How will we ensure that girls' education there is not reversed? We must not abandon the women of Afghanistan—we owe them our support.

12.44 pm

Lord Ricketts (CB) [V]: My Lords, I join the noble Lord, Lord Jay, in paying tribute to the work of Sir Laurie Bristow and the British embassy team in Kabul during these dangerous days. I also fully agree with other noble Lords who have spoken about the need for Britain to be a major player in the looming humanitarian crisis and for a resettlement scheme which enables large numbers to come quickly to this country, particularly vulnerable women and those who are at acute risk because they worked with us in Afghanistan. They trusted us to stick with them, and we have let them down. We also face the reality that to ensure safe passage for vulnerable people, we will need to deal with the Taliban authorities, which is a point to bear in mind when it comes to issues of recognition.

I want to touch on the strategic implications of what has happened, starting with NATO. Good allies need to be honest with each other, so it needs to be said that the American handling of Afghanistan these last two years has been a decisive contribution to the current disaster. President Trump's decision to negotiate with the Taliban undermined the Afghan Government. President Biden's decision to set an arbitrary deadline to suit US political purposes has really knocked the morale of Afghan security forces and triggered the unravelling of events that we have seen in recent days. I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Hammond, that the low-level western security presence over recent years provided reassurance to the regime and deterrence against Taliban adventurism, at low risk to western forces. That is all now gone. The chaotic scenes in Kabul are on a par with Saigon in 1975, except in that case, the humiliation was American; in this case it is shared with all American allies.

Our objective in Afghanistan was never simply to deny safe space to the terrorists. The first ISAF mission that the UK commanded in 2001 set out with a wider objective. The name itself is significant: the International Security Assistance Force. That is the mission that many allies went into Afghanistan with, in solidarity with the Americans. They stuck it out for 20 difficult years, and we have left precious little security behind.

Confidence in NATO has been damaged. China is the main beneficiary of President Biden's decision. "America is back" now sounds rather hollow—"America is backing down" fits the case better. The British priority must be to address the damage done to NATO, to rebuild effective political consultations within NATO, and to focus on European security and the risk of

[LORD RICKETTS]

Islamic terrorism in Europe. Rather than tilting to the Indo-Pacific, that is where the UK needs to put its national security energies.

In the light of the sorry end to the Afghanistan mission, we also need to rethink how the West can use force in the future where it is necessary to protect its interests, as it surely will need to do again somewhere, sometime.

12.47 pm

Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb (GP) [V]: My Lords, it is very difficult to express just how sad and horror-struck I am after the events in Afghanistan. Of course, it is not only now but in the weeks, months and years ahead that we will all feel the repercussions. My noble friend Lady Bennett of Manor Castle will speak later in the debate on the geopolitical aspects of the events, but I will concentrate on the people of Afghanistan who have become refugees, particularly on the fate of women, who are now living in Afghanistan under a Taliban regime.

Regretfully, our record as a welcoming and responsible country is very damaged. Last year, about 79.5 million people worldwide were forced to leave their homes and become refugees, and we took in just over 20,000 of those—approximately 0.026% of the world's refugees. We must not forget that we are responsible, because of the way that we behave, for many of those people.

What could and should our Government do to demonstrate the best and most honourable intentions? Well, we can offer solidarity, humanity and refuge for as many as we can. Immediately, we should offer amnesty to undocumented Afghans in the UK. Many Afghan asylum seekers were refused on the grounds that they could return safely to Kabul, but that is clearly false now. Immediately, for those refugees en route, the Government should increase their shameful arbitrary limit of 20,000 over five years. To enable this, local authorities must be fully financed to help with the resettlement, with an especial aim to reunite families. We have to be bold, kind and generous.

And then, as the noble Baroness, Lady Hodgson of Abinger, mentioned, there are the women who are still in Afghanistan. We must support the women and girls facing Taliban erasure of their rights, education, freedom and, potentially, their lives. Afghan women, particularly those known to be feminists—that will be a very broad definition for the Taliban—will be heavily attacked in one way or another. We must demand that our Government commit to give refuge to women who are known because they are part of the women's movement: because they are judges, as the noble and learned Lord, Lord Judge mentioned, professors, high school teachers, women police, women firefighters, women in the army, and women who are taxi drivers, musicians, artists or journalists. All these women are vulnerable now. Of course, women who do not have passports for their children must be allowed in without their passports. Refugees are people who have lost control of their lives. We have to remember that, if our Government do not start to take climate change seriously, we ourselves could be refugees too.

12.51 pm

Lord Lamont of Lerwick (Con): My Lords, the images of Kabul airport will remain in people's minds for a very long time. This has been a deeply humiliating episode, deeply damaging to the credibility of the West.

Like every other speaker in the debate, I pay tribute to our soldiers who have served in Afghanistan. They can hold their heads up high; their sacrifice has not been in vain, and we appreciate it.

After 20 years, it is hardly surprising that in America the appetite for the war was waning. However, if withdrawal was inevitable, the manner in which it was done was catastrophic. Did it have to be so abrupt and absolute? The US negotiated in Doha the equivalent of a surrender to the Taliban. All that was left was for the Taliban to follow through.

However, President Biden had a point when he said that America could hardly continue to fight when the Afghans themselves would not fight. After 20 years of training and expensive weapons, the Afghan army evaporated in the face of a smaller Taliban force. Perhaps that was to be expected when so many soldiers had not been paid for months and officials in Kabul diverted salaries into bank accounts. Corruption was the one institution that worked in Afghanistan. What has happened is tragic, but part of the tragedy was also the idea of Afghanistan as an incipient law-based democracy. It was always a challenging concept. Perhaps it worked in the better parts of Kabul or Herat, but not in Kandahar or in the rural areas, or in a country as tribal and as fragmented geographically as Afghanistan.

None the less, remarkable progress was made in developing civil society, education and women's rights, and I pay tribute to the courageous women in Afghanistan. However, even after 20 years, that progress was fragile, depending as it did on a continuing protecting western military presence. That presence could not go on forever; the West would always have to leave at some point. And so this tragedy demonstrates why intervention is often so difficult. So often our interventions in the region, such as in Iraq and Libya, have not worked out as planned, and so often they have had unintended consequences. It is going a long way back, but remember that the Taliban came into existence out of US-Saudi support for the mujaheddin. All the original leaders of the Taliban were members of the mujaheddin who were welcomed in the White House in 1983 by Ronald Reagan. The US created a monster it could neither control nor defeat.

Some dignity needs to be salvaged out of this fiasco. We need to rescue as many as possible of the brave Afghans who supported our Armed Forces and women's NGOs. As the Prime Minister said, countries should wait before recognising any new Government in Kabul. The US and NATO need to make clear to the Taliban that any hosting of al-Qaeda or ISIS will not be tolerated and will meet an immediate reply. But above all, we need to reassess our own policies and capabilities. We need a hard-headed, realistic view of our place in the world. Perhaps we should be a little bit careful about parading our aircraft carriers around the world, sabre-rattling to American cheers.

12.55 pm

Baroness Taylor of Bolton (Lab) [V]: My Lords, I join those paying tribute to the 457 and to all those who have helped to make the last 20 years safer for all of us. Like others, I do not believe it was in vain, but I have some questions that I would like the Minister to consider and answer.

My first question is: what went wrong with our intelligence collection and analysis? It is inconceivable that the West would have gone ahead with this withdrawal in this way if we had known that this catastrophe would have unfolded as it has. There must have been a comprehensive intelligence assessment at the highest level, both in the UK and in the US, with whom we work so closely. Therefore, we have to ask what went wrong and we need to have a full and urgent inquiry into this. I was chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee at the time of 9/11, the Bali bombing and the Iraq war. At that time, the ISC was allowed very good access to see what had happened and to consider the intel that was available. The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, as it is now called, must undertake an urgent and comprehensive inquiry into what can only be called an intelligence failure. There are reports that the Government want to curtail the power of that committee. I hope that that will not happen, because it must be allowed to work in an unfettered way. I hope that the Minister will today confirm that that will be allowed.

My second question relates to the quality and the nature of the training that was given to the Afghan armed forces and to those involved in nation-building and developing the economy. When I was a Minister in the MoD, when I visited Afghanistan I was told that the quality of our training across the board was second to none. If that was the case, why was there no resilience and why did the forces of the state collapse so completely and so quickly? A senior military figure said today that it may be because we were trying to replicate our own systems and approaches. That is the kind of issue that needs thinking about carefully, and Parliament has an important role in examining such questions.

Parliament must also have a role in ensuring that the welfare of our Afghan veterans is considered yet again. This will have been a great shock to all those who served. We must consider the repercussions of this on their mental health, because they need perhaps more support than ever, given what has happened in the last few days.

12.58 pm

Lord Wallace of Saltaire (LD): My Lords, Tom Tugendhat has compared the implications of this crisis for the UK's international standing with the Suez crisis, which abruptly demonstrated the extent of our dependence on the United States and the unwillingness of the US Administration to take British interests into account when American priorities were at stake. The precipitate nature of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan has shown us that Trump is not the only US President who puts America first.

Yesterday, I reread the Government's *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, published only five months ago. It is full of Boris Johnson's boosterism on global Britain, as a science and soft-power superpower, as extending its military reach to the Pacific Ocean, as exerting disproportionate influence on the global order through its position at the centre of interconnecting diplomatic networks. The Prime Minister declares in the introduction that our most valuable and influential partnership is

that with the United States. It is now clear that the idea of global Britain is a Johnsonian fantasy. There is no special place for the UK when the US President makes crucial foreign policy decisions, even when we have contributed military, intelligence and diplomatic support to the US-led efforts in Afghanistan, including substantial development assistance.

Our response to this latest development has been closer to that of our European allies than to that of the USA, but we have excluded ourselves from the multilateral foreign policy networks that Mrs Thatcher's Government helped to establish with other European Governments, so we have struggled to consult multiple capitals one by one. The Government are now calling for collective action on the likely surge of refugees towards Europe and the threats of increased drugs trafficking and transnational terrorism, so we will share our sovereignty with our neighbours in devising common responses to challenges that spill over international borders. So much for Britain's reassertion of absolute sovereignty. When the going gets tough, we have to work with others.

I read in the *Financial Times* today that our Prime Minister has told the Prime Minister of Pakistan not to act unilaterally in recognising the Taliban regime. Boris Johnson clearly lacks any concern for consistency or sense of shame. He acts unilaterally by breaking an international agreement he has only recently signed, but he tells others to behave more responsibly. The integrated review is now inoperable. As my noble friend Lord Newby said in his opening speech, we need to develop a more realistic view of our place in the world, not the post-imperial rhetoric that our Prime Minister so loves.

1.01 pm

Lord Stirrup (CB): My Lords, I will make just three points. First, the strategic purpose of our engagement in Afghanistan, for which so many brave people sacrificed life and limb, was to prevent that country being, or becoming again, a safe haven for international terrorist groups. This remained our purpose right up until these last weeks. It was not, as President Biden has implied, about educating girls or supporting other civil reforms. Worthy though such objectives are, they were, in a strategic sense, ways of achieving the end, not the end itself. Now, it seems, that strategic purpose is at risk. The Taliban leaders have said they will not allow terrorist groups to re-establish themselves in Afghanistan—but, judging by the rapidity with which they have ignored other undertakings, we must surely assume that this one will be equally ephemeral. Perhaps the Minister can say where this leaves our counterterrorism strategy.

Secondly, President Biden has suggested that the Afghans are not prepared to fight for their own country. But this ignores two facts. The first is the very large number of Afghan security forces personnel who have been killed on operations over the past two decades, and the second is that Afghan society has always placed much greater importance on loyalty to family, village and clan than to a central Government. In such a society, a military force modelled on the US army could never, in the short term, endure without the logistical, technical and moral support of the US armed forces. Once that was withdrawn, its collapse

[LORD STIRRUP]

was both predictable and predicted. In another two or three decades it might have been different, but not today.

Thirdly, President Biden purportedly wishes to withdraw from Afghanistan in order to concentrate on China. Yet his actions have immediately benefited China on several fronts. China is increasingly engaged commercially in Afghanistan and has been negotiating with the Taliban. Taken together with Pakistan's increasing reliance on China, this creates a disturbing nexus of power in the region. Even more important is the perception of other countries. If the western powers are to resist China's assault on the current rules-based international order, they will require strong political, economic and technological allies in the Indo-Pacific region. Who now, though, will be prepared to throw in their lot with a US-led effort, when that country's leadership has proved such a fickle friend to Afghanistan? Perhaps the Minister can say what the implications are for the UK's own tilt to the Indo-Pacific, which was such a prominent feature of the recent integrated review.

For now, though, we must concentrate on fulfilling our moral obligations to those Afghans who have supported us so well over the years. We owe them no less. The Government have said that they will be generous in this regard; I trust that their actions will match their fine words.

1.05 pm

Baroness Helic (Con) [V]: My Lords, I start by paying tribute to all those who served in Afghanistan, those who lost their lives and those who were injured. I agree that this is a disaster. The coalition's withdrawal has created a long-term problem: a major humanitarian crisis with no end in sight and an ongoing risk of Afghanistan once again becoming a terrorists' safe haven. I welcome the decision to receive 20,000 refugees, but, given the urgency of the situation, I fear that 5,000 is insufficient for the next year. When people face death, the prospect of asylum in a year's time is not much hope. Most Afghans will stay in Afghanistan, and 20,000 is less than 0.1% of the population.

The world should open its doors to refugees with generosity, but we cannot empty the country. What is going to happen to the Afghans left behind? Humanitarian aid will be necessary. We cut our aid funding for Afghanistan by 78% this year. That has to be reversed fast. Supporting women and girls with education and healthcare will be more important now than ever, whether they are in refugee camps or in towns and villages throughout Afghanistan. This will be far harder than before, but we must find a way.

We must also ask how we ended up here. How did an army collapse overnight? The withdrawal of American troops was a severe blow to capability and morale. The importance of the 2,500 American soldiers far outweighed their number. Their presence was a sign of the weight of global backing behind the Afghans on the front line. They were a crucial buttress for the Afghan national army—a core part of its design. Their withdrawal left it unsupported, demoralised and ready to crash down.

Even more worrying than the effect of the withdrawal on the Afghan national army was its apparently similar effect on NATO and the international coalition. I

understand that the MoD tried to rally international partners to take up America's role. That that proved impossible does not reflect well on the strength of NATO and on our ability to act abroad or without the US by our side. Only five months after it was published, the integrated review is out of date. It said:

“We will continue to support stability in Afghanistan, as part of a wider coalition”

and that providing support to the Government of Afghanistan would be a key part of our counterterrorism strategy. The Government of Afghanistan are no more, the wider coalition has collapsed, and our influence in Washington seems alarmingly limited, as is our influence in Europe.

The past week has been the most extraordinary of the reversals. The Afghan Government were flawed but they were democratic. The direction of travel was right. Now they have been swept aside and all the gains of the past 20 years could go into reverse. As we approach the 20th anniversary of 9/11 next month, the Taliban control more of Afghanistan than they did when the Twin Towers fell. That leaves us with three urgent questions. How do we support the Afghans now stuck under the new rule? Where does this leave our allies and our foreign policy? Where does this leave global Britain? The Government must try to answer them.

1.08 pm

Baroness Ramsay of Cartvale (Lab) [V]: My Lords, since before I left government service in 1991, I have been involved one way or another in Afghanistan, with all its complexities with outside forces. Because of time constraints, I shall make five very short points.

First, much of the criticism of the Afghani forces is unfair and wrong. In many provincial centres, civil leaders beseeched Afghani commanders not to fight the Taliban, to avoid the human and material destruction that would entail for their communities.

Secondly, did no one think that the 20th anniversary of their defeat was as important symbolically and politically to the Taliban as to the US and its allies, and that their determination to achieve victory by that date was as strong as the US's to withdraw? So why the surprise that they moved so quickly?

Thirdly, when we are considering our responsibilities to Afghans who helped our forces and NGOs, we must also remember the more than 100 BBC World Service staff in Afghanistan, on its Pashtun, Dari, Persian and English services. Whether they want to stay in or leave Afghanistan, they and their families deserve our protection.

Fourthly, as a long-term admirer of President Biden, I cannot be alone in being disappointed by his speech on Monday. Did he not remember the chorus,

“It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it

That's what gets results”?

Fifthly, the only positive comments I have seen so far are from China, Russia and, predictably, the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Does that not tell us something?

In conclusion, I do not know whether I am more angry, horrified, upset or ashamed by what has happened and how it happened. To tell the truth, I am all of those and then some.

1.10 pm

Baroness Brinton (LD) [V]: My Lords, I declare my interests as a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

I want to start with our moral duty as a country to the locally employed staff—interpreters, embassy staff and others—and their families. The noble Lord, Lord Dannatt, made the point of principle about extracting them from Afghanistan as soon as possible. I also echo my noble friend Lord Purvis’s comments on the Afghanistan resettlement plan. However, I see from the ARAP notice last month that these key people are to be given only five years’ leave to remain. That is completely unacceptable. There is no likely return for years, if ever, so resettlement should be made permanent from the start.

I also understand from the Local Government Association that around 2,000 have already arrived in recent weeks. Does this mean that the UK is taking only 3,000 more this calendar year? It is apparent that these numbers are woefully inadequate. Does the Minister agree that the Government must increase them in light of the current emergency?

For those who do arrive, there are many practical problems, so the principles of the military covenant should be provided for those in the ARAP scheme, many of whom will have lived through the same as, and worse than, our wonderful service men and women. I am hearing that GPs in some of the receiving areas are already full and not taking new patients. Access to urgent health services, especially mental health services, is vital for new arrivals.

While the Home Office is paying for hotel accommodation for quarantine and beyond until permanent housing can be found, can the Minister say what financial support will be given to local authorities, which are being asked at very short notice to find permanent housing for families when there is already a national shortage? Many local authorities are accepting their responsibilities and stepping up to help, but the cuts that local government has faced in recent years, as well as pandemic pressures, mean that resources to help these families, which are vital if they are to settle swiftly, will be difficult to find. One council leader told me of problems in their area in finding any school places, because all their schools are already full. It is vital that these children start school with everyone else. Using the principles of the military covenant means that local solutions absolutely must be found, and children deserve that support.

Finally, I completely agree with my leader, my noble friend Lord Newby, about the effect of this debacle on service personnel who were deployed in Afghanistan, especially those injured and those who lost loved ones, and their family and friends. Having talked in the last few days to UK service personnel who were deployed to Afghanistan, I am hearing that many, whether still serving or veterans, are having difficult memories reawakened and worse. Some are having flashbacks and their PTSD is triggered. The MoD is ensuring that current service men and women are being signposted to help, but can the Minister say whether there is specific signposting for veterans no longer in the services so that they can get any urgent help that they need?

1.14 pm

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean (Con) [V]: My Lords, I very much agree with that last point from the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton. It is very hard to overestimate the scale of the catastrophe following the Biden Administration’s disastrous implementation of the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.

The report of your Lordships’ International Relations and Defence Select Committee, *The UK and Afghanistan*, which was published as recently as January, has sadly proved prescient. It is disappointing, to say the least, that so many of its recommendations fell on stony ground. The committee, under the outstanding chairmanship of my noble friend Lady Anelay, warned:

“The UK’s interests in Afghanistan are not unique and distinct: they are bound up with those of its allies, led by the US. The UK has had limited opportunities, and has shown little inclination, to exert an independent voice and, along with other NATO Allies, has followed the US’s lead. This is regrettable, not least in view of the UK’s very substantial commitment to Afghanistan, both financially and militarily.”

It went on:

“There is a real risk that the principal national security challenges still posed by Afghanistan, namely terrorism, narcotics and regional instability, could worsen, and the gains made since 2001 could be lost.”

It was utterly disingenuous for President Biden to present the Afghans as unwilling to fight for their country, after having withdrawn vital US support services without an agreed ceasefire, precipitating the collapse of the Afghan state. The US allies, including the Afghan Government, were bypassed in Doha by President Trump, who signed a withdrawal, not a peace, agreement. Twenty years of sacrifice were abandoned for bumper-sticker politics, with no effective plan to protect those who had put their trust in the United States. Again, the Select Committee of this House warned:

“The ongoing presence of UK troops in Afghanistan depends on the deployment decisions of the US. We were disappointed by the ... analysis of the implications of the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan provided by ministers”.

On 12 October 2006, at Oral Questions, I asked the then Defence Minister, the noble Lord, Lord Drayson: “has the Minister read the history of foreign intervention in Afghanistan, and why does he think that history will not repeat itself on this occasion?”

In his reply, he said:

“I have studied Afghanistan’s history and think the important point is that the Soviet campaign and the campaigns of the British Empire were absolutely different in nature from what we are undertaking. We, with our coalition partners, are supporting the development of a democracy in Afghanistan, with the complete support of the people of Afghanistan as expressed in their democratic elections. That is completely different.” —[*Official Report*, 12/10/06; col. 359.]

Listening to President Biden, it was apparently not about that at all. History is repeating itself, and exacting a terrible price in human misery and insecurity.

1.17 pm

Baroness D’Souza (CB) [V]: My Lords, the tragedy that is Afghanistan today is the consequence of many miscalculations, assumptions, faulty intelligence—or perhaps political decisions to disregard intelligence reports—and hubris. The fact is that 20 years of largely successful endeavours in building democratic institutions, and above all in educating girls, may be lost.

[BARONESS D'SOUZA]

On the face of it, regardless of the policies the UK may have wished to implement in Afghanistan, the fact is that there was no room for manoeuvre at all once the USA had decided to withdraw its troops. The UK was hemmed in and had no alternatives to pursue other than US policy and action. It is therefore fair to say that UK foreign policy is now so firmly tied to that of the USA that independent action is virtually ruled out.

Post 9/11, the UK Government at the time agreed with the US that the onslaught in October 2001 was aimed at getting rid of al-Qaeda and preventing further terrorist attacks targeting the USA, and that a stable democracy with a trained army would be the best insurance for both these goals. Billions of dollars were then spent on a wide range of programmes aimed at building the institutions of democracy. President Biden's most recent claim that there was no intention to impose any kind of western model is, to my mind, wrong. There clearly was: the US ODA programmes went far beyond rendering al-Qaeda impotent.

Then, for domestic electoral reasons, the Americans wanted their forces out. That was understandable but the mechanisms employed, as set out in the US-Taliban Doha agreement in 2020, flew in the face of any democratic process. Enormous concessions were granted to the Taliban with few, if any, guarantees. The talks began with a refusal to include either the legitimate Afghan Government or major allies among other interested parties. The demands set out at the beginning of the talks were the result not of any negotiation but of Taliban diktat—for example, the withdrawal of not only troops but all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisers and supporting service personnel, and the release of Taliban prisoners.

The talks were not about achieving any kind of peace but promoted the reputation and political influence of the Taliban. The Taliban's insistence on removing all counterterrorism operations does not bode well for the future. Despite the many serious flaws, the talks were agreed without amendment by other NATO allies so the "war" was in fact settled in February 2020, and the carnage between then and now has merely been a Taliban way of keeping the upper hand at the Doha talks. Why were there no objections to, for example, the absence of any protections for human rights or the rights of women? Why did Pakistan get off so lightly that it could continue to enable Taliban atrocities?

Why is the world so surprised by the success of the Taliban in gaining complete control? It was given to them in the interests of satisfying an American electorate by those very nations that sought to eliminate them. Can the Government now assure the House that lessons have been learned and that an independent foreign policy might well follow?

1.21 pm

Lord Goldsmith (Lab) [V]: My Lords, there are many in Afghanistan whose safety must now be protected, including those who have worked to support the rule of law, such as Mr Rohullah Qarizada, president of the Afghanistan Independent Bar Association, who has been engaged in hundreds of cases fighting for human rights and now fears for his life and the lives of his family.

I particularly join the noble and learned Lord, Lord Judge, in drawing attention to the situation of 250 Afghan women judges who are uniquely at risk, not just because they are women but because they are judges who have served on anti-terrorism, anti-corruption, drug and criminal courts and have sentenced Taliban members. Those sentenced might be angry at any judge but the fact that a woman judge would exercise that authority enrages them. The judges are therefore getting phone calls with threats and their contact details are readily available through bribes. They are burning their law books to avoid being identified. They are at grave risk of revenge by murder and assassination. The situation is urgent. As the Taliban have advanced, they have been opening prisons and releasing prisoners, including from Bagram, where some of the worst terrorists were incarcerated.

These brave women need protection. Many were trained with assistance from the West, including this country. As the president of the International Association of Women Judges said in a statement, these women should be extended the same special measures applying to interpreters, journalists and other personnel who provided essential services.

Our Government should support this case. In listing the vulnerable groups who deserve protection and will get it, the Lord Privy Seal did not include women judges in Afghanistan. I ask the Minister to confirm when he replies that they will be included in those groups. The shame that we already have at deserting Afghanistan will be doubled if we do not help women whom we have encouraged to serve their country by promoting the rule of law and who now find themselves in deadly peril.

1.23 pm

Lord Blencathra (Con): My Lords, all my life I have been pro-American and favourably disposed to the United States, but not any more at this moment. What Biden has done in Afghanistan will go down in ignominy as one of the most shameful and despicable acts of betrayal by any American President. Tens of thousands of men will be slaughtered, thousands of young girls forced to marry these Taliban brutes and 14 million women driven back into slavery. Afghanistan was emerging into the light with freedoms for women and children, who will now be ruled with 500 year-old barbaric religious laws. That is Biden's legacy. He cannot blame it on Trump; Biden boasted that in his first 100 days he issued a record 24 executive orders, all of which were direct reversals of Trump policies. He should have listened to his generals and changed this policy also.

This is not like Saigon; it is far worse. First, the retaliation against the population by Islamist fanatics is likely to be far greater than what the North Vietnamese did to the beaten south. Secondly, the appalling humanitarian crisis described in this House today will centre on Afghanistan but the terrorist consequences of this US sell-out will affect us all. The Viet Cong had no agenda outside Vietnam but Afghanistan is now under the control of Islamist fanatics who want to wage war on every western democracy.

The US spent billions equipping the Afghan army. A few weeks ago, Biden said:

“We provided our Afghan partners with all the tools—let me emphasize: all the tools”.

He has just donated all those tools to the Taliban—the largest arms haul in history. He has given the Taliban and al-Qaeda state-of-the-art military equipment. The Taliban of course will not need all those weapons and will pass them on to terrorists around the world. Just as the Stingers that the CIA gave the Taliban to fight the Soviets in the 1980s were used against the Americans from 2001 onwards, so these US weapons will now be used against us. The Taliban will empty the bank vaults but fill the opium factories. They will fund terrorism around the world, aided and abetted by their corrupt ally and partner Pakistan, with its totally treacherous ISI security service.

The final disaster in this is the question of who will stand up to China now. China has been working with the Taliban hand-in-glove so that it can get into Afghanistan and rob it of every mineral that it can get its hands on. I am afraid that this blundering President—who, according to press reports, apparently got lost in his own garden—has now lost the credibility of US leadership with this surrender.

Biden has put America back, all right—back into the bunker. The lesson for China is this: play a long game and America will not have the stomach to stick it out. China is a threat to world peace, but how can we now trust the US to lead the long battle against it? Biden may have condemned the world to Chinese domination in future and the end of western liberal democracy.

1.27 pm

Lord Taylor of Goss Moor (LD) [V]: My Lords, sadly, there is no way to dismiss the fact that this is an absolute catastrophe for the people of Afghanistan, especially its women, those who have supported principles of liberal democracy and those who have attempted to enforce proper justice in that country, all of whose lives are now under threat, let alone those who worked directly and bravely to support our forces—and let us not forget the 70,000 Afghan troops who lost their lives in this fight. President Biden’s comment that that they did not have the stomach seem entirely inappropriate to me. The stomach was taken from them by the Americans withdrawing the contractors who supported and enabled their air force and then telling them that they were destined for defeat. What more could have been expected?

We must act on behalf of those people whose lives are threatened in Afghanistan. There is only so much that we can do, but places for 5,000 this year do not come near what we owe those people who have worked so hard for us in those countries and for our values, and whose lives are now under threat. I cannot go through all the details in the time allotted, but the Human Rights Watch report circulated to Members of this House sets out comprehensively the series of steps that need to be taken to support those who supported us, their families and those now at risk, let alone the journalists and lawyers. Those steps must be taken. I hope all Ministers in this Government will read that report and take action on it.

Secondly, this catastrophe may be even more profound beyond the borders of Afghanistan than within them. The simple fact is that since the Cold War we have

somehow believed that liberal democracy was inevitable and the battle of ideas was over, but that is clearly the opposite of the truth. The rise of authoritarian dictatorships, the strength of China and the reinvigoration of Russian interventionism are all empowered by this situation because those countries see the absolute weakness of those who believe in liberal democratic values. There is no willingness to see things through or take them to the end. This withdrawal was for the sake of a few thousand troops—not a huge engagement—who were supporting genuine liberal reforms, the progression of democracy in Afghanistan and, above all, providing enormous protection for the rights of women and others in their daily lives. Many will die as a result of this decision.

However, that is as nothing compared to what we have seen, from Syria to now Afghanistan, of the unwillingness of western liberal democracies, led by America, to take a stand. We now have to accept that we cannot rely on American leadership. We need to reach out to our other allies, across Europe and the wider world, to make sure that we have the ability to assert ourselves. If that lesson is not learned, China, Russia, Iran and many others will draw their conclusions, as indeed they are celebrating today.

1.30 pm

Lord Hunt of Wirral (Con): I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Taylor of Goss Moor, that, sadly, there is no escaping the ignominious nature of what has occurred in Afghanistan. It is the consequence not just of a single misjudgment but of an accumulation of misjudgments by successive Governments and Administrations in the western world. Allocating blame may be invidious and even unhelpful, but we must be sure to learn vital lessons from what has occurred, and we must also resolve to do the right thing now.

I am sure that my noble friend Lord Empey was right to say that there has been a terrible failure of intelligence. There has also been some unfortunate—perhaps spectacularly unfortunate—management of expectations, with far too much talk of long-term nation-building, when the western powers, and the United States in particular, evidently had no intention ever of committing on such a scale. It is surely high time we learned that it is not possible to build a secure and sustainable nation state by force, by imposition or even by exhortation where the requisite social and economic foundations are just not in place. In such a scenario, the only options are an impossibly expensive and protracted long-term colonisation or so-called surgical strikes, or the kind of time-limited, ultimately ineffective occupation that we have just witnessed, with its inevitable aftermath.

What we leave behind in Afghanistan is a chaotic and tribally and religiously divided nation with an uncertain future, including thousands of individuals who now, as many noble Lords have explained, fear being treated as collaborators by the resurgent Taliban, and all of whom will feel understandably abandoned and betrayed. I do not believe it is right or even possible for the western powers to intervene on any meaningful scale in Afghanistan again, but it is within our power now to honour our obligations to the many individuals who have committed their energies to the

[LORD HUNT OF WIRRAL]

noble ideal of a free Afghanistan—in other words, the supposed mission which we and our allies now seem to have abandoned.

Afghanistan may not be a safe haven for the foreseeable future, so we must decide quickly where one can be established for those who seek to escape the clutches of the Taliban. The only true safe haven may be here in the United Kingdom. At last, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary appear to have acknowledged that, and I welcome both their candour and their decency. It is a matter of humanity and a matter of honour.

1.34 pm

Lord Adonis (Lab) [V]: My Lords, the immediate emergency facing the Government and the House is the refugee crisis. I would like to ask the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad, if he could reply to three specific questions at the end of the debate.

The first is on the issue of just 5,000 Afghan refugees being admitted this year. He will have heard across the House acute concern at that level of admissions and that it should be significantly higher. Is it the case that 3,000 of those are already accounted for by translators and immediate staff working for the British embassy and British forces in Afghanistan? If so, that figure of 5,000 will be grossly inadequate.

Secondly, the number of 20,000 appears to have been plucked out of the air. The Government have given a commitment in respect of Hong Kong Chinese residents who are affected by persecution in Hong Kong, which amounts to many hundreds of thousands who would have the right to come to this country. Why has a similar commitment not been given in respect of Afghanistan? Will the Government keep an open mind about increasing that 20,000 figure if, as is likely, the number applying with very good reason for refugee status increases?

Thirdly, much mention has been made of staff working directly for British forces and the British embassy in Afghanistan, but there is also a big issue in respect of staff working for NGOs. Will refugee status and priority be given to staff working for NGOs? In an email I received this morning, the leader of an NGO set out the issue in stark terms, saying that

“the UK employed thousands of Afghans to work on their projects in Afghanistan—mainly on improving people’s lives through strengthening government systems or delivering basic services. These people in many cases now have specific threats to their life. I’ve heard of members of our staff who have been hunted down by the Talibs and had to flee with their families to hide in basements, just because they were our office manager or trained people on tax procedures. Unfortunately, the UK, although it is relocating its embassy staff and translators, is providing no means to evacuate or relocate those staff who worked on their projects and are at risk of death or harm. This stands in stark contrast to the US, who are relocating even the cleaners of some US media organisations.”

My noble friend Lady Ramsay of Cartvale mentioned BBC staff, but I think this issue goes much more widely to include all staff employed by or helping UK-based NGOs. The House would appreciate a response to that issue when the Minister replies.

1.37 pm

Baroness Fall (Con) [V]: My Lords, these are grave days that we are witnessing; the good intentions of 20 years lie in tatters. Those many British and Afghans who risked, and in some cases paid with, their lives to

bring stability and hope to Afghanistan deserved so much better. I think that we can all agree that this is not the endgame any of us would have wished for. Let us be clear: few supported the continuation of the large deployment of troops we had a decade ago, but there is a very big difference between a draw-down and a chaotic exit such as this.

In recent years, with a small number troops, we were able to bring stability to the country, help train the Afghan army and police, and support aid operatives doing so much good on the ground. Then President Trump announced a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, with no discussion with his NATO allies and with no apparent concern that this undermined any success of the peace talks. It was clear to us on the foreign affairs Select Committee that it was impossible to deliver peace with no leverage and that such leverage should come from the ongoing presence of US and NATO troops. Like many others, I have wholeheartedly welcomed President Biden’s return to a more multilateral approach, which made all the more disappointing his decision to press ahead with a complete American withdrawal. This was never a peace plan; it was an exit plan, and a disastrous one at that.

First, the speed and efficiency of the Taliban campaign has obviously surprised everyone. This speaks either to a failure of intelligence or a failure of leadership. Secondly, it seems extremely disappointing that we were not able to exert more influence on our closest ally to prevent this course of events. Let us not kid ourselves: the damage to the US’s global reputation and that of its allies—in other words, us—is immense. The heartbreaking images of us walking away from the people and their families who supported our coalition over 20 years and put their trust in us is a matter of grave shame which will linger. Our neglect is the gain of others whom we do not call our allies, such as China, Iran and Russia. And for what? Twenty years on, we have simply delivered the very thing we were trying to avoid: a Taliban-run Afghanistan; a country which is likely to harbour terrorist groups and store up security issues for the foreseeable future—the very reason why we went in in the first place.

Of the many people we have let down, the potential and terrible impact on the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan weighs heavily. Afghanistan was already one of the most aid-dependent countries in the world and we are now looking at a potential humanitarian disaster.

While so much harm has been done, there is still time to try to do some right. First, we must do all we can to secure safe departure for the many Afghans who served alongside us, and I welcome news of the government settlement. Secondly, we must do what we can to avoid a full-blown humanitarian crisis—news of an aid package is welcome. Finally, we must exert as much international pressure as we can to stop Afghanistan reverting to the dark days. No one wanted a for-ever war, but we have now sown the seeds for a long-term security and humanitarian crisis, and we must do all we can to stand by the people who put their trust in us.

1.41 pm

Lord Bilimoria (CB) [V]: My Lords, the decision to intervene militarily in Afghanistan, just after 11 September 2001, was the first and only time NATO applied

Article 5. It was a unanimous decision—an attack on one member is an attack on all. The mission was accomplished almost immediately. It took another decade to find Osama bin Laden and now, another decade later, we have left.

A point made by other noble Lords was on the difference we made with a relatively small number of people in Afghanistan, changing, training the army and making a huge difference, with no terrorist attack on western soil emanating from Afghanistan in these two decades. This was with less than 20,000 personnel, including from the USA and the UK. In Germany, the USA alone has more than double that number and they have been there for over 75 years, as they have in Japan. They have been in South Korea for decades.

We can never thank our troops enough for their service and sacrifice—our brave, amazing, best-of-the-best troops. The sad ultimate sacrifice was made by the 457 who died, those who have been injured and their families. But their sacrifice was not in vain; they made a huge difference to a country, giving hope to a country of young people. Some 64% of the population of Afghanistan is under the age of 25. The hopes and dreams of these young people is Afghanistan's future, and we must do all we can to help them. We cannot thank enough the thousands of UK-employed civilians and their families. We have a moral duty to resettle them here immediately. There are no limits of 5,000 a year—whatever it takes, we must do it now.

Britain has to show global leadership on the global stage. With the presidency of the G7 and the G20 coming up, and NATO, we have hard and soft power in abundance. We have cut our development aid by 75% and now need to increase aid to Afghanistan dramatically. Do the Government agree?

Just this week, along with my co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Students, I wrote to the Prime Minister saying we must do everything possible to support Afghani students—35 Chevening scholars and others—to get their visas so they can travel to the UK. In Birmingham University alone, where I am chancellor, we have 27 potential Afghani students for this coming academic year. Can the Government reassure us on this?

We have heard that the BBC has 100 people on the ground and that it is a trusted service there; 60% of the adult population of Afghanistan use the BBC as a source. We have heard that the development has been amazing: in 2003, less than 10% of girls were in primary schools; now, it is 33%. In secondary schools, it has gone from 6% to 39%. There are 3.5 million girls at school and 100,000 at university, and 20% of the workforce is women. Yet Afghanistan is on the brink of returning to a narco-state, with almost 40% of the Taliban's revenue coming from opium.

India is one of the top trading partners of Afghanistan. Has the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, had a meeting with the Indian Foreign Minister Dr Jaishankar? The UK and India need to partner together. India has invested hugely in development projects in Afghanistan, such as on power, water supply, road connectivity, healthcare, education, agriculture and capacity building.

I can find no better way to conclude than by quoting Ambassador TS Tirumurti, the Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations. On 16 August, he said:

“Afghanistan has already seen enough bloodshed in the past. It is time for the international community to come together unitedly, rising above any partisan interests, to support the people of Afghanistan in their desire for peace, stability and security in the country and to enable all Afghans, including women, children and minorities, to live in peace and dignity.”

1.44 pm

Baroness Walmsley (LD) [V]: My Lords, I will focus on the humanitarian situation. I declare an interest as an honorary fellow and former board member of UNICEF UK, to which my allowance for today will be donated. I know that many of my colleagues will be making similar donations.

The ordinary Afghan people, particularly children and their mothers and carers, are defenceless. They have no choice about their future; they just want peace and security. Currently, about half the population—18 million people—needs humanitarian aid. Only the NGOs are there to help them. In addition to UNICEF, Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee and many others need donations, because our Government have drastically cut international aid to Afghanistan over the past year. The UK slashed its international aid commitment from \$78 million last year to only \$18 million so far this year. The Foreign Secretary's statement yesterday that UK aid to Afghanistan will be increased by 10% left me aghast. That 10% of a very reduced amount is pathetically little and the Government should be ashamed of themselves. My first question to the Minister is: will the Government immediately restore their cuts to the international aid budget and ensure that an increased amount goes to Afghanistan and the region, through reliable NGOs and working together with other western donors?

Although the top priority must be to rescue those whose lives are in imminent mortal danger, there are 350,000 internally displaced people on the move in the country—women and children, fleeing to Kabul from the violence in their villages, sitting on the street or in bus stations, with no food, water, protection or medical help. With the breakdown of the Government, only the NGOs can help them. The majority of NGO staff are Afghans, but they need supplies and organisational expertise from abroad. Many of them know their lives are in danger, as the noble Lord, Lord Adonis, just mentioned. The next priority should be to help the thousands of vulnerable people who cannot travel abroad and thus remain on the street. Therefore, my second question to the Minister is: what are the Government's plans to provide practical help to the NGOs? Are they engaging in the Doha talks and will they press the Taliban to ensure the safety of NGO staff at all levels, as they go about their brave work?

Finally, 30,000 people are fleeing the country every week, many to Commonwealth countries, such as Pakistan and India, before the borders were closed. My last question is: what discussions did the Prime Minister have with the Prime Minister of Pakistan yesterday, regarding our and Pakistan's commitments to Afghan refugees?

1.47 pm

Lord Dobbs (Con) [V]: My Lords, this is a moment of defeat, possibly of great disaster. It follows the unlearned lessons of Suez, Vietnam, Iraq, Libya and

[LORD DOBBS]

Syria. This was not only foreseeable; it was foreseen. There were voices aplenty—generals, politicians and almost every serious historian—who said we could not win in Afghanistan, and they were right. No foreign power ever arrived in Afghanistan and left behind anything but bleached bones. We have lost lives on a colossal scale—our own and our allies, but many more Afghans, those we were supposed to be saving. Our reputation has been dragged through the dried-up riverbeds of Helmand. Our enemies rejoice and, today, our friends—great democracies in the Baltic, Asia and elsewhere—have woken up in a more dangerous world.

What do we do? Do we turn our backs on intervention and refuse to help those who are oppressed? Of course we do not, but there are limits to such a policy. We cannot win every war, everywhere. Do we send in the bombers and leave behind nothing but mountains of dust? There is no victory in that. Do we simply follow, mute and blind, behind our American allies? That has not worked very well in recent years either. It is time for us to be more grown-up about that relationship with America and NATO, remembering the lessons of the Cold War. It is not just force of arms that overcomes great challenges, but the still-greater power of persistent persuasion, overwhelming by example and showing off the best of western values, not just the sharp end of our missile systems.

Above all, we need once more to find belief in ourselves—to stop talking our values down and to redefine, re-engage with and re-energise them. Then, perhaps, once again, we can send them around the world to speak for us and regain the trust that we have lost—but that will take time. I applaud Ben Wallace for his honesty in acknowledging that we will not get everyone back. His tears spoke more powerfully than the self-serving, self-deceiving—even cowardly—White House communiqués.

We have suffered a bitter defeat. The only response must be to move forward, determined but without arrogance, having learned, I hope, many painful lessons. But if we fail to learn the lessons, there will be worse to come.

1.50 pm

Lord Kerr of Kinlochard (CB) [V]: On the geopolitics, I echo the comments of my former colleagues, the noble Lords, Lord Jay and Lord Ricketts, but I will use my time to point to a lacuna in the Lord Privy Seal's five-strand speech.

I have in mind the plight of the 3,117 Afghan asylum seekers who are already here, trapped in the 70,000-long queue of those seeking asylum, not allowed to work and with no recourse to public funds, other than the miserable £5 daily subsistence allowance. It is plainly wrong that, as recently as last week, some of them were receiving rejection letters based on the current Home Office guidance, which states that

“the proportion of the population affected by indiscriminate violence is small and not at a level where a returnee, even one with no family or other network and who has no experience living in Kabul, would face a serious ... threat to their life or person”.

That is shaming. That was last week. Surely it was obvious by then that anyone who had fled Afghanistan, perhaps particularly those who had come here, would be at serious risk if sent back. We must not send them back.

Is it not obvious that, where someone has been refused asylum and is in the long, slow appeals process, the initial claim must now be reassessed, in the light of the changed situation, to see whether asylum can now be granted and the stress and expense of the court procedure avoided? I would be grateful if the Minister replying to the debate assured us that all current Afghan asylum cases will now be so reassessed—better late than never. Let us do the decent thing.

I hope that he will also respond to the leader of the Opposition's call to drop the plan in the Nationality and Borders Bill to criminalise those fleeing from the Taliban who arrive in small boats. I hope that he will also respond to the Liberal Democrat leader's appeal to extend the scope of the ARAP programme to anyone, employee or contractor, who worked for or helped any UK agency, military or civilian—be it the BBC World Service, the British Council, the embassy or NGOs. The Taliban will not discriminate by the British funder and neither must we. The scheme must be extended to those who have fled Afghanistan but would have been eligible for it had they felt able to stay. I hope that the Minister will reassure us on that score as well. We may be facing defeat, but we can still avoid dishonour.

1.53 pm

Baroness Pidding (Con) [V]: My Lords, when western forces arrived in Afghanistan in 2001, the country's population was 20 million. It now stands at 38 million, the majority of whom are under 18. While imperfect, American, British and allies' engagement in Afghanistan has fostered a generation of Afghans, particularly women, who have had access to education and routes for empowerment. While we have kept the wolves from the door, we can be proud of what we have achieved. We can be proud of our Armed Forces, who gave so much, with so many giving the ultimate sacrifice: their life. I wish to pay tribute to a member of my own family, Sam, who, like countless others, sustained serious life-changing injuries while serving in our Armed Forces, fighting for the freedom of the people of Afghanistan.

Progress made in Afghanistan is now at grave risk. While much of the focus in the western media has been on the need to evacuate diplomatic personnel and those brave Afghans who have worked alongside our troops for the past two decades, another debate needs to be had. The question is: what will become of the countless thousands—in the fullness of time, perhaps millions—of refugees who have already begun pouring out of Afghanistan into neighbouring states? The international community abundantly failed to plan for the eventuality that, upon US troop withdrawal, the Taliban would make such rapid progress in seizing control of the country.

There can be no excuse now for the international community, particularly the US, the UK and the EU, not to work closely with aid bodies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross to formulate an urgent plan to assist these refugees. The biting cold of the Afghan and central Asian autumn and winter months is only weeks away. We must face the reality that many Afghans will not be able to flee: they will be stuck in a metaphorical prison of the Taliban's creation.

To this end, we must look at what the UK Government and the FCDO are able to do, within the bounds of possibility, to continue to fund projects focused on education and sanitation in the country. Of paramount importance will be ensuring that young Afghans continue to have a path to participate in the Chevening Fellowship scheme. The tragedy of this conflict is not the loss of face that it has brought for western government, although that will be sincerely felt; it is the loss of homes, livelihoods and dreams among ordinary Afghans, most notably women and girls. We cannot and must not fail them.

1.56 pm

Baroness Amos (Lab): My Lords, it is eight years since I visited Afghanistan, and the appalling scenes from Kabul, the heart-breaking testimony of women and girls, the despair of aid workers and the questioning of the value of our interaction and presence by so many of our Armed Forces brought back to me forcefully the anger and frustration of dealing with conflict situations, particularly where the rhetoric of the international community does not match the reality.

Previous speakers have spoken eloquently of the scale of the global diplomatic failure, the long-term security consequences, the urgency of the humanitarian catastrophe facing the country, the need to support the Afghan people—particularly women and girls—and the importance of focusing on what we do now and next. From my experience, I know that the Afghan people will feel abandoned. They will not know where to turn, as they await reprisals for the glimmer of hope they allowed themselves to feel that their country was opening up and that the gains that had been made were being consolidated—gains that were made on the back of the courage and bravery of millions of Afghans.

Many of the things that struck me about Afghanistan all those years ago are still relevant today. The first is the complexity of the country—its urban and rural regional differences. Some areas outside Kabul were actually peaceful. The complexity is reflected in its history and the different interests of the UN Security Council members and neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan.

One of the major failings of Britain and the international community seems to be our ongoing lack of understanding of culture and context. In 2018, the ODI produced a report called *Life under the Taliban Shadow Government*, which concluded:

“The Taliban set the rules in vast swathes of Afghanistan, controlling education, access to information, healthcare, economic activity”

and so on, which impact the lives of millions of Afghans. Had we done our homework, we would not have been surprised at the speed of their recent success. It underlines that we use the language of global Britain to mask a failure of comprehensive policy analysis to inform strategic decision-making. I ask the Minister: when the Prime Minister speaks to other G7 leaders and engages with the Security Council, what will change in our approach?

Secondly, in terms of the need for dialogue, the Taliban are not a monolithic organisation. We saw the way that local staff working for civil society organisations, for example, negotiated locally for access and service

provision. We need to create the possibility that the extreme voices do not flourish. Track two diplomacy is a real thing, used in every conflict; it is a nonsense to pretend otherwise. Can the Minister say what plans we have in that regard? Can he also say whether we will support a resolution to protect women and girls—indeed, whether we will initiate such a resolution—at the Security Council? How do we intend to support UN and other agencies working in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries as they respond to the unfolding crisis? Will the Government rethink their decisions on the aid budget?

I have watched every time that we have let people down. I ran out of things to say; I ran out of excuses to make. Let us not do it again.

2.01 pm

Lord Dholakia (LD): My Lords, it is a delight to follow the noble Baroness, Lady Amos.

In a fully functioning democracy, we would have expected the Government to inform us about the constantly changing situation in Afghanistan; until today, it has not been possible. The Foreign Secretary has almost remained muted for a long time, and it is our high-calibre journalists and newspapers that have been at the forefront of updating us about what precisely is going on in a country where we have substantially invested in promoting democracy and democratic values and human rights.

In the past, I have avoided the temptation to contribute in debates with a large number of speakers. This time, I have a special reason to make my contribution: I was privileged as a delegate to visit Camp Bastion, the British base, in the company of a number of other parliamentarians. We were privileged to fly in an aircraft that was adapted to bring our wounded soldiers back to the UK.

We talk about over 450 British lives lost; we will have to add to this the large number of casualties we have now lost in civilian lives. What a heavy price we have paid. I was once told by a prominent Army general that you never get involved in a conflict unless you have a clear exit strategy. In Afghanistan, we seem to have lost this particular point.

However, let us thank our Armed Forces for the remarkable humanitarian work that they undertook. Despite fierce resistance from the Taliban, the British Army delivered a turbine for a large-scale power scheme at Kajaki dam, which generates enough power to feed 1.5 million people. Our medical and surgical facilities at Camp Bastion ensured that even enemies were not denied help.

I have also had the privilege to meet a number of Afghani delegates at inter-parliamentary conferences abroad. One point that they often raised was about Britain's idea about promoting democracy in a predominantly tribal society. It is time that we think about how our work can be advanced and how democratic values should be promoted where religion and tribal rules and loyalty play an important part. After 20 years, we seem not to have much of an idea on this particular point.

There is no dispute that those who wish to leave Afghanistan should be assisted, but what lessons have we learned, given that, with a trained Afghani army of

[LORD DHOLAKIA]
over 300,000, the Taliban was successful in taking over Kabul without any resistance? The present crisis points to failures at various levels. Did we ever work out the policy implication of the Taliban takeover? How effective was our intelligence service? The capacity-building work will now be negated. What is likely to replace this under the new regime? The allegations of corruption were rife against the previous Administration. The extent of opium production has remained high all these years. There is still no news about the involvement of al-Qaeda and ISIS in the present events.

My final point is about the Afghani people wishing to leave their homeland. I once had an interesting meeting with Lord Carr of Hadley, who dealt with this type of crisis as Home Secretary. He told me that it took less than five minutes for the Cabinet to take a decision that admitted 29,000 Ugandan Asians to this country. We should look at the initiative that the Government took at that time, which is today proved by the remarkable contribution of this community in Britain. The same can happen with refugees from Afghanistan.

The Lord Speaker (Lord McFall of Alcluith): I call the noble Lord, Lord Flight. Lord Flight? I think we will come back to the noble Lord. I call the noble Baroness, Lady Ritchie of Downpatrick.

2.06 pm

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick (Non-Afl) [V]: My Lords, as events in Afghanistan unfolded on our TV screens, my immediate thoughts were with the plight and circumstances of the ordinary Afghani population—particularly those to whom the UK owes a direct duty of care—and the ongoing and worsening humanitarian situation.

Obviously, in addition to our immediate humanitarian concerns, this crisis also calls into question, fundamentally, the future role of the international community and leaders in the UK and US. It is, therefore, nothing short of incredible that, if the end of the conflict was so predictable to the US and UK, with a probable dénouement at Kabul international airport, the western allies have allowed this predictable outcome to descend into the chaotic, embarrassing and shameful ending it has become. Despite all the military analysts, planners and strategists, there appears to have been no real preparation or planning—but then that might have interfered with some people's holidays.

We can return to the abject failure of the West and the profound foreign policy implications for the UK at a later date, but the real question now is: what do the UK Government and their allies do? What do we all do? The answer must be for us to really step up and grip the humanitarian crisis through direct involvement that is determined and compassionate.

That means, first, helping everyone who wishes to leave Afghanistan, as many noble Lords have said, and providing generously for their relocation, even working with the Taliban or through interlocutors. The UK must take a proportionate share of refugees—I note the plan announced last night—and those displaced, and provide a new start for them. London must work closely with the devolved Administrations in this regard.

Secondly, we must be prepared to give strong financial and other support to the international agencies and NGOs still operating within Afghanistan. We must shoulder our fair share of the effort of the international community.

Thirdly, we should be preparing now to assist with food aid and other help in the event of the expected famine.

Finally, along with other states, we must halt deportations of failed asylum seekers from Afghanistan and ensure broader access to asylum procedures. And, as the noble Baroness, Lady Amos, has already said, we must have a realistic overseas aid budget, which is currently too low and needs to be increased.

2.09 pm

Lord Houghton of Richmond (CB) [V]: I agree with all those today who feel sorry for the plight of the Afghan people, and for the service men and women who died or had their lives badly damaged by service in that country. The American decision to withdraw military support was a dreadful one and the resulting chaos should be of no surprise. But, rather than criticise American decisions or show anguish for Afghanistan's future, I want to use my time to reflect on our own national outlook—our ambition in overseas military involvement, particularly in the context of the recent integrated review, which described an international security situation in which we were already engaged in a battle for ideas, truth and human values.

Some in this House will know enough of military theory to recall Clausewitz's famous trinity: a trinity of society, government and the Armed Forces which, if any great national endeavour is to be successful, needs to be in harmony. A bond of mutual trust and support has to exist between the elements of the trinity, or the nation will lack the integrity and resolve to see an endeavour through. My own close involvement in the two most recent national campaigns, in Iraq and Afghanistan, has led me to believe that the United Kingdom never remotely enjoyed the beneficial advantage of a trinity in harmony.

Indeed, neither of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan ever enjoyed the unreserved support of a British society that doubted their strategic wisdom. They quickly became unpopular wars, and society's emotional relationship with its Armed Forces became one of sympathy rather than support. Secondly, once the British Government of the day had sensed society's prevailing view, damage limitation rather than national resolve became the principal ingredient of strategy. Within Whitehall, troop reductions and military extraction became the true metrics of success. Thirdly, as I closely observed, there existed an unhealthy level of mutual suspicion between military advice, often in pursuit of greater resources, and political judgment demanding the exact opposite.

I fear that the Government's recent integrated review gave little thought to the state of the Clausewitzian trinity in the UK. I therefore worry that, although we retain an aspiration to be a global Britain, we currently lack the national preconditions to support such an ambition. Our military budget remains primarily invested in the totemic platforms of a bygone age. We cannot afford the aid budget which underpinned much of our

global moral standing; our diplomacy seems focused on losing friends, not making them; and our societal instincts are tending to the view that charity begins at home.

I say all this while continuing to believe that the United Kingdom is a wonderful country, a great place to live, a model of tolerance, the envy of many and with the latent qualities to achieve great things when the conditions are right. But the situation unfolding in Afghanistan should teach us the sobering lesson that only when we can combine national integrity, good friends, adequate resources and resolute intent will we be able to succeed in any endeavour that demands prolonged commitment and sacrifice. The one that now confronts us—a global struggle for ideas, values and human decency—must be seen in that light. If we do not, we really are in trouble.

The Lord Speaker (Lord McFall of Alcluith): I call again the noble Lord, Lord Flight. No? I call the noble Baroness, Lady Hooper.

2.13 pm

Baroness Hooper (Con): My Lords, amidst the tragedy and grief, and sheer fear and panic, that we have seen unfolding in Afghanistan over the last week, let us not forget that there are nevertheless other parts of the world where human tragedy and urgent needs prevail. I speak of Haiti as one such example.

It was my intention in speaking today to focus on the plight of students—young people at the start of their lives, many of them women, and all of whom have been through a rigorous selection procedure to get into universities and colleges in this country. For them to be told that their visas and other documentation had not been completed, so that they could not leave earlier than planned, must have been a shock. I was therefore relieved to hear from my noble friend the Leader that efforts are being made to complete the task, especially for Chevening scholars. The noble Lord, Lord Bilimoria, also emphasised this issue. It cannot be beyond the wit of man to speed up the visa process in such an emergency. The future of Afghanistan, especially if things do not go quite as badly as we anticipate, will require well trained and educated people who have been exposed to international thinking and freedoms to be future leaders. Chevening scholars have certainly proved themselves capable of that in the past.

I will touch on two other special cases. We can only begin to imagine the plight of the BBC staff, for example, who have been providing a vital source of trusted news for the last 20 years, working in three languages. They should certainly be given priority if they find themselves in danger and need to get out quickly. Finally, another small but important UK-inspired organisation under threat is Nowzad, an animal charity that has worked over the years to rescue dogs and cats. It has now 74 members of staff, including Afghan women, some of whom have retrained to become vets. It has started up Operation Ark in an effort to save the staff, plus 140 dogs and 40 cats. I hope that someone will take pity on them.

I have never visited Afghanistan personally, but so many speaking in this debate have considerable expertise and knowledge, so I believe it has been very valuable. I hope and trust that the Government will listen.

2.16 pm

Lord Anderson of Swansea (Lab): My Lords, in three minutes I will give three reflections. First, on the lessons of history, the noble Lord, Lord King, reminded us of the unwinnable wars of the 1840s and 1880s in Afghanistan when, in spite of the pledges of safe conduct, our people were massacred in the Khyber Pass. This led to the saying, “You cannot buy an Afghan, only rent one”—which may also help to explain the rapid collapse of the ANA and the unheroic handing over of towns without a fight. But of course we also recall the Soviet intervention in the 1980s, which President Gorbachev called the “bleeding wound”.

What is the Government’s best analysis of the reasons for the rapid defeat? What are the geopolitical consequences of that defeat? President Biden, alas, will be diminished, certainly abroad. Do the Government see any danger of the US retreating into a new isolationism, abandoning the aspirations of nation building, spreading democracy and human rights, and a corresponding loss of trust in the US? Some will repeat the wisdom of the old saying “Do not enter the box unless your exit is clear”.

For the UK, one lesson in reality is in the limits of a post-Brexit independent foreign policy. In spite of our military expenditure and expertise, when the US leaves, we leave. Our adversaries will be emboldened; the jihadists worldwide will celebrate; and there is a loss of trust in our pledged word and our ability to stay the course. Other lessons include that if we allow the pendulum of intervention—after the high point of the Chicago speech and the duty to protect—to swing too far in the opposite direction, it will be to our disadvantage.

How do we respond to the reality of the Taliban? It depends, of course, ultimately on their conduct. Are they latter-day Bourbons or do we believe their PR people, which would be extremely naive? How united in fact are the Taliban and what is the best analysis we have of that? Yes, of course, bring out our citizens and those who depend on us—but we should be extremely generous, particularly in respect of women and girls. We have reduced our aid; who will lose out as a result of the doubling of that aid? Will our aid agencies, the NGOs, be allowed by the Taliban to operate freely?

We should build bridges where we can and where there is an overlap of interest, at least partially, with countries such as China and Russia. But we need to work particularly closely with Pakistan, which will assume a new importance in its regional role. In short, we should look long and learn the lessons of history, and we should remain very true to our own values.

The Lord Speaker (Lord McFall of Alcluith): Last call for the noble Lord, Lord Flight.

2.19 pm

Lord Flight (Con) [V]: My Lords, the speed of the Taliban’s success and the failure to act by Afghanistan’s 300,000 soldiers look to be largely the result of Donald Trump’s deal with the Taliban to withdraw US troops by May this year and what was potentially an unspoken deal. President Biden declared in turn that he had zero responsibility to Afghanistan, insisting that his obligation was solely to protect America’s national self-interest.

[LORD FLIGHT]

Little could have been more damaging than this and what has been allowed to happen. Let us hope that the Taliban leaders act in accordance with the fairness which they are prone to simply talking about. Clearly, the danger is that other delicate political situations around the world could become destabilised, and where the West's threatened intervention, if necessary, might not be believed. In particular danger is Taiwan, where China might no longer believe that the US's commitment would be honoured if China invaded Taiwan. The worst affected in Afghanistan will be women, sometimes forced to marry, forbidden education and forced to stay at home. This is tragic, in that a degree of emancipation of women was one of the few successes of the previous regime.

The failure of the Kabul Government has reflected poor leadership by both government and military officers. The White House handling of the US withdrawal has been described as completely immoral. The US does not care what happens to the many local individuals who have been working with the West. The West faces the risk of the Taliban state becoming again a base for terrorist activity and involvement around the world.

The UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace is reported as having said that President Biden's withdrawal was a mistake, yet the inability of the UK to do anything about it only underscores what US critics of the project have always said: it is Pax Americana, largely paid for by American taxpayers.

The EU's reaction was farcical when it issued a warning that if the Taliban took Kabul, which it has done, and established an Islamic regime, it would face isolation—as if the Taliban cares. US action has been irresponsible in thus pulling the rug, an action substantially caused by Trump sending a signal effectively inviting the Taliban to walk in. It also sends a dangerous signal for other parts of the world relying on US protection. Russia and China now know or perceive that, in the face of problems, US policy will likely be to cut and run. It looks extraordinary that an Afghan army of allegedly 300,000 should have thus been so ineffective and fallen apart, with many joining the Taliban. Why, after 20 years of successful western support, could the Afghan state still not protect its people? I trust that the West will help all those Afghans who have worked with the West by getting them out in time and providing them with somewhere to live.

2.23 pm

Baroness Hussein-Ece (LD) [V]: My Lords, my experience over many years has been in dealing with the human cost of wars: in supporting and helping refugees, those who have fled conflict and oppression, particularly girls and women. Refugees are not migrants; they are not illegal people, and it is time that we stopped seeing the demonisation of these human beings. Three million Afghan people who have already paid such a high price for many decades have now been displaced. It is reported that 80% are women. These past few weeks I have been desperately trying to help to get Afghan individuals whom I know very well out of Afghanistan. These are people who, for many years, worked with the British and our allies, believed in us and our values and trusted us, and are now targeted.

They applied and were quickly, and in my view callously, rejected for the existing resettlement scheme. They are now in danger and in hiding, and I feel ashamed.

I want to raise a few practical points. The chaos we are seeing at Kabul airport continues, along with the suspension of commercial flights. For those like my friends who have passports and those with documentation, there is no point if Kabul airport remains inaccessible to them. Just today, there have been reports of shooting just outside and people injured. There is no coherent system for processing people and thousands cannot leave. Can the Minister assure us that more will be done in the coming days to increase the issue of visas and that charter flights will be used to airlift vulnerable Afghans? There are Taliban checkpoints surrounding the airport, and I received a message earlier that the Taliban now has a checkpoint at the entrance, physically preventing people from leaving. Will the Minister tell us who will take charge of airport security if the Americans conclude their evacuation mission on 31 August? What, if any, discussions are taking place? Will the Taliban take over control there?

Turning to the new, bespoke scheme, how can Afghans such as my friends apply for that scheme if we do not have an embassy in the country? If they are expected to make their way to the UK, that would surely exclude those without financial means and would almost certainly exclude women and children and vulnerable people from leaving. More than 7,000 Afghans alone work for the British, and if we include their families, that would be more than 20,000, so 5,000—the reported figure that we have heard—is completely inadequate. It is a failure of moral responsibility before we even start.

Finally, the Taliban leadership said that they would honour women's rights within the limits of Islamic law. Nowhere in Islam and our cultural practices is there the promotion of the violation and oppression of women and girls that we have been seeing. There is no such thing as limitations: we read that as their own version of Islamic laws. I am therefore extremely sceptical that they will respect women's rights, and we have already seen evidence of brutal treatment. To the Government I say this: cutting international aid just weeks ago for projects that educated 6,000 Afghan girls does not send a signal that we actually care. We must now step up, show leadership and support the Afghan people.

2.27 pm

Lord Hannan of Kingsclere (Con): My Lords, sometimes in politics there are no good options. You have to choose between bad alternatives: you can do X and ugly things will happen or you can not do X and ugly things will still happen. Whichever one you have chosen, the media and a chunk of the public will point to those ugly things as clear evidence that you should have picked the other course, either because they do not understand the concept of lesser evils or because they affect not to.

The reality is that ever since the terrorist abominations of September 2001, we have been in a world of lesser evils. Every course of action open to the West will have carried costs. Going into Iraq and Afghanistan carried visible costs, dissipating blood and treasure and causing

civilian deaths. I was and remain an opponent of the Iraq war: I continue to believe that the costs we incurred were higher than the costs that we would have incurred through non-intervention.

I am not going to pretend, however, that the costs of non-intervention would have been zero. There is always a balance to be identified, and to that extent I have some sympathy with at least the part of President Biden's argument where he said, "Look, given the way in which the authorities collapsed, it is clear that our only alternative to Taliban rule would have been an open-ended occupation." That is not a knock-down argument. As other noble Lords have said, the US has had a fairly open-ended commitment to South Korea since 1957.

All I am saying is that we should accept that every decision in Afghanistan was a choice among bad options. Going in was a choice among bad options. Prolonging the mission after the degradation of the al-Qaeda bases was a choice among bad options. Extending the mission to cover nation building, female emancipation and education was a choice among bad options. Leaving was a choice among bad options. None the less, I consider it to have been the worst choice. It would have been one thing to have gone in, attacked al-Qaeda and pulled out, but once we were committed, once we had made a statement of intent, our honour was on the line.

Let me quote, rather unwontedly, that sly and calculating former President, Richard Nixon. This is what he said in 1970, justifying what we would now call a surge, seen as a prelude to withdrawal from Vietnam:

"If, when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world."

Who can doubt that he was right? How do the decision and the events of last week look from Beijing or Moscow, the two great illiberal powers having just conducted a massive set of joint exercises in north-western China? How does this look from Taiwan or even Pakistan? If you are an up-and-coming young officer cadet, do you want to train in the US or in China? Might you start thinking of learning Mandarin? Has it not emboldened every tinpot tyrant from Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua to Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, partly because they are no longer in awe of the English-speaking powers?

We have become very blasé about the world through which we have lived. We can be anti-colonialist and dismissive in an attitude bred from decades of peace and security. But as that world reaches its close, we may soon have the opportunity to regret what has passed.

2.31 pm

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, reference has been made in the debate to the International Relations and Defence Committee report on Afghanistan published in January. Negligently, its prescient recommendations and conclusions have never been debated. That report excoriated the Government for showing "little inclination ... to exert an independent voice" and criticised the US for "undermining NATO unity." It warned that troop withdrawal "runs contrary to the UK's objective of securing a durable negotiated settlement"

and had

"the potential to further destabilise the security situation".

in Afghanistan. So let no one suggest that no one foresaw or predicted the consequences.

As we look to the future, we now need belatedly to seek an urgent strengthening of a co-ordinated and coherent NATO approach. This must surely include a united response rejecting the international recognition of the legitimacy which the Taliban craves that is likely to be given by China, Russia and Pakistan. Such recognition should never be given while female university students, women journalists and 250 women judges—and minorities such as the Hazaras and the Christians, as well as countless others—go in fear of their lives.

As Afghanistan now becomes a global terrorist academy, and the Taliban give sanctuary, training and funding to terror groups, we must steadfastly ignore their public relations insistence that they are not labelled as terrorists. The Select Committee pointed to Taliban links to al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network and called for an urgent review of the Home Office failure, not replicated in other Five Eyes countries, to include Islamic State Khorasan Province on its list of proscribed terrorist organisations.

Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's former distinguished ambassador to the United States, who gave evidence to the Select Committee, said this week:

"But what is happening in Kabul will not stay in Kabul. Radical Islamists, armed with the powerful narrative of driving out two superpowers through jihad, will challenge the American-led order across much of the Muslim world".

As we have heard in the debate, notably from the noble Lord, Lord Hannan, but also from my noble and gallant friend Lord Stirrup, we should note the recent pact made between the Taliban and the Chinese Communist Party, which undoubtedly now threatens Taiwan.

Some 60% of Afghanistan's economy is made up of aid. Will we follow Germany and make aid conditional on there being no revenge killings or imprisonment of political opponents, and on girls' schools remaining open, and how will that aid be channelled through reputable NGOs to ensure that it is not embezzled by the Taliban? When will we sever the money supplied to the Taliban through its opium war, which provides 65% of its income and accounts for 95% of the heroin on British streets?

The Taliban often say, "You have the clocks, we have the time." We still need to prove them wrong.

2.34 pm

Baroness Verma (Con) [V]: My Lords, this has been a really frightening debate. I am even more worried now, simply because we are looking at aid being an answer and moving people out being an answer, yet we have a totally and utterly destabilised region. Where aid is concerned, I suspect that China will do more than enough to fill the Taliban's coffers and therefore that the Taliban will not look to bring aid into the country from well-meaning countries such as ours.

I am really concerned about the minority communities in Afghanistan. I got an email just this morning about 270 Hindus and Sikhs who are taking sanctuary in a temple. How will they be able to leave the country?

[BARONESS VERMA]

Who is going to help their passage towards the airport? Who is going to give them the visas to leave? The debate needs deep consideration, and I ask my noble friend the Minister what he is doing to work with countries in the region, such as India, which have the power and the strength to influence the partners around the region. We are not going to do this by ourselves.

The noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, and my noble friend Lord Blencathra said so many important and poignant things. America has been fickle in its decisions. We cannot. We just cannot leave the fate of thousands—millions—of people in the hands of those around the region who are stepping up and stepping in because a vacuum has been created. We need to understand how we are going to help those who are trying to leave by getting them access and passage to the airport. As other noble Lords have said, the checkpoints are now manned and armed by the Taliban, so how are people to have faith that they will be able to leave their homes to try to make it to the airport or the border?

Finally, I ask my noble friend what he and the Government are doing, as discussions unfold, to ask: where has President Ghani gone? Where has he taken all the money that has been given to him to help his country? Where on earth have all these arms that are now in the hands of the Taliban come from? Who has supplied them? We need a real, honest debate about how we are going to support that country and the region.

2.38 pm

Baroness Crawley (Lab): My Lords, in this chaotic endgame in Afghanistan, we cannot simply clamour for something—anything—to be done; we must learn. As the noble Lord, Lord Robertson, said, those torn between washing their hands of it all and wringing their hands help no one, least of all the Afghan people, in these perilous hours and days.

Today, every honour and gratitude must go to our service men and women, who put their lives and limbs on the line over the last 20 years to give the Afghan people a fighting chance of a decent future, and to those Afghans who have supported and worked alongside us as interpreters and in the NGOs and whose lives are now in terrible jeopardy.

A humanitarian disaster looms, as many have said, and the question so many of us are asking is: why? The speed with which the Taliban marched through that country and took that control was so miscalculated by the UK and our allies. Why was the Foreign Secretary on holiday in the last few days? Why did our intelligence collapse? How did we not realise that behind the cover of the Doha peace talks the Taliban were, month by month, doing deals and paying off local warlords and officials in order for the city gates to be left open when they came knocking this August?

What did Ben Wallace—and I respect what he has said in the last few days—mean when he said that, for those who do not get out immediately, “we will have to do our best in third countries to process those people”?

Which third countries? How will we negotiate the conditions for that to happen? Is the NATO allies’ stance to negotiate with the Taliban locally while not

recognising it nationally? The Taliban may have state-of-the-art mobile phones now and employ press officers, but they are still the same women-hating, drug-trading, murderous thugs they always were—who cut off the tips of women’s thumbs if they wore nail varnish and stoned them to death if they refused loyalty.

What plans are there for an ongoing Berlin-style airlift? The interpreters’ relocation and assistance programme finally being expanded is to be welcomed, but who will it cover and how long will it last? How are our refugee policies going to meet the needs of fleeing young Afghan men and women? Why, as many noble Lords have asked, is there a 20,000-person cap? Why have we been told about this only today? Does it cover those already in the UK? Was the “get the girls out” policy written overnight?

In the years after 9/11 I stood at that Dispatch Box and I honestly believed that our presence and investment would stem al-Qaeda terrorism and help lay the foundations of a new civil society in Afghanistan. Some might say I should have paid more attention to my history lessons. Call me old-fashioned, but I still believe that, given all the sacrifices in lives, aid and investment, the West cannot ultimately abandon Afghanistan to the Taliban.

2.42 pm

Lord Dodds of Duncairn (DUP) [V]: My Lords, the scenes from Kabul have filled me and many others with immense sadness, despair and anger—they would bring tears from a stone. I think today of the people who have served in Afghanistan and of the people who are suffering now. I salute our brave troops, as so many noble Lords have, those of our allies in the US and elsewhere, the Afghan interpreters and others who helped our forces. We think of the British personnel who sacrificed their lives and of how their families feel today, and of the immense losses among Afghan forces and civilians.

There is no point in glossing over the truth: our troops have not been defeated and their sacrifices are not in vain. But the US—the West, if you like—has, through a scandalously defective series of political and diplomatic decisions, allowed victory to turn into the ashes of defeat. As someone said, the hard yards have been done; to see 20 years of blood, sacrifice and billions of pounds end like this is heartbreaking. The veterans and their families will need help and support even more today than they did a week ago. I implore the Government to do everything they can, along with veterans’ charities, to reach out and give them that support.

The immediate priority is, of course, for the Government to do whatever it takes to get UK nationals and those who helped us and our allies out of Afghanistan. If, as the Government say, they saw this coming, can they explain why there is a desperate last-minute scramble to rescue people, which is mainly dependent on Taliban acquiescence? Is the reality not that there has been a catastrophic failure of intelligence, or perhaps more accurately, in relation to the United States, a failure of the Administration to listen? There needs to be an inquiry into all of this. President Biden’s speech the other day, blaming everyone and everything except his Administration’s precipitative pull-out, was truly awful.

We have a duty to Afghanistan and its people and we must be generous in allowing people from there to come here to settle if they are allowed to and they can. The word of the Taliban is worthless; we know their record on human rights. Their best allies are terrorist groups. What steps will the Government now take to stop Afghan territory being used as a base for terrorist training and a launch pad for terrorist attacks?

I fear that the US decision to pull out in the way that it has will have dire consequences. It sends a message to the terrorists and rogue states that the West can be defeated. It sends a message to our friends that, at the end of the day, they can be abandoned. It sends a message to those who want to live in freedom and with human rights guaranteed, especially the women and girls of Afghanistan, that we cannot be relied upon.

The lesson of Afghanistan must be that, if we are to intervene abroad, we must be prepared to stay the course, otherwise we need to be careful not to raise false hopes, embolden our enemies and destroy lives needlessly. The families of the 457 service men and women who died, the thousands injured and maimed, and the tens of thousands who served, must get the constant, enduring and effective support they need in the years ahead.

2.45 pm

Lord Lilley (Con) [V]: My Lords, after hubris comes nemesis. Let us not dwell on the nemesis—the humiliation visited on America and her allies—but identify the hubris that led to it. It was right and inevitable that America, following the twin towers atrocity visited on that great country, should take punitive action against the perpetrators. That meant demanding that the state that had harboured al-Qaeda hand over its leaders, eradicate its bases and expel its supporters. Failing which, the US was perfectly entitled to enforce its demands from the air or with boots on the ground. But, as the noble Lord, Lord West of Spithead, said, that being done, it should have left. The hubris was to imagine that the US or NATO had the power or the right to transform the character and culture of a distant nation—something neither the British Empire at its zenith nor the Soviet Union with all its ruthlessness could achieve.

What is the moral of this tale? It is that morality depends on recognising reality. We have no obligation to attempt what we do not have the power to achieve. As Enoch Powell once put it, in the form of an equation, power equals force divided by distance multiplied by will. What we have the power to enforce in our own neighbourhood we may not have the power to attain where we cannot deploy force, or where any forces are attenuated by lengthy supply lines. Where we can exert force, we will have the will to exercise it effectively only if it is clearly in the interests—moral as well as material—of our own nation, as otherwise it will not be sustainable.

The hubristic belief that we can exercise military power we do not possess is matched by and often rooted in an illusion that we have a moral authority and moral obligations on a global scale. There is not a problem in the farthest corner of the globe that we do not demand Ministers take responsibility for; there is not an issue, from global warming to migration, biodiversity and global poverty, on which we do not

imagine that the rest of the world is hanging on our actions to follow our example. How strange that, despite the loss of empire, liberal imperialism has flourished and grown—not least in this House and on the Opposition Benches.

I do not advocate that we retreat within our own carapace in these islands, and still less that we abandon genuine moral responsibilities, but we must recognise that our obligations extend no further than our power to fulfil them. We should do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, not because we vainly imagine we are leading the world.

2.48 pm

Lord Alderdice (LD) [V]: My Lords, I remind the House of my registered interests in war and conflict studies.

On 4 October 2001, less than a month after 9/11 and a few days before the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom, we debated what should be done. I intervene again today, like some other participants of 20 years ago, but miss my dear friend, Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon. In a powerful speech then, Paddy focused on the history of Afghanistan. His family connection went back a century before his birth, in India, in 1941, to his great-grandfather, who had been in Kabul caught up in the first Afghan war, from which we withdrew in 1842, suffering one of the worst military disasters of the 19th century. Paddy reminded us that Afghanistan had rarely been at peace and advised of the perils of engagement. I said that day that the problem was not the absence of socioeconomic development but of a wholly different culture and beliefs, which we would not change for the better by military intervention.

The first rule of Afghanistan is that invaders do not win, and the second is that it will not be a liberal democracy in any foreseeable future. For 20 years now, bookended by the geopolitical catastrophes of 9/11 and August 2021, we have engaged in a war undertaken in 2001 to address our concerns. It was not undertaken primarily at the time to aid the Afghans, and what could have worked as a short, punitive strike was ultimately doomed when it tried regime and culture change.

Another colleague we miss today is Baroness Williams of Crosby. She rightly asked then about UN involvement, but that was blocked in early 2008, when the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, vetoed Paddy Ashdown's appointment as UN envoy, despite his highly successful mandate in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Our response then should have been to engage in talks with the Taliban. That was the advice given later to the Foreign Office by my Northern Ireland colleagues, brought in by the British ambassador. It was dismissed by London. That is my second point: do not ignore the advice of those who have lived through terror-afflicted violence and come out the other side; we may understand the messy reality better than those whose optimistic wishes dominate their diplomatic assessment.

Thirdly, research has shown that it is not overwhelming military power and technical sophistication but the passionate spiritual commitment of devoted actors that wins wars, and this should inform every response to the demand that "Something must be done". We do

[LORD ALDERDICE]

not have time for a long Chilcot-type inquiry, because these lessons are relevant to current involvements across the Muslim world, including, as I learned from some leading Palestinians earlier this week, in Israel-Palestine.

Does the Minister recognise that we ignore history at our peril; that we are unable to build liberal democracies from the outside; and that, ultimately, we are likely to end a conflict best by understanding the spiritual strength of our enemies and negotiating with them when the time is right? It is too late to do that when you have decided you are leaving.

Baroness Chisholm of Owlpen (Con): My Lords, I say quickly that almost every speech has gone over time and we are now nearly half way through. Can we all please keep an eye on the time, because we do not want to eat into my noble friend's speech, so he can answer all your questions fully? Thank you.

2.52 pm

Lord Farmer (Con): My Lords, it is my sincere hope that blood and treasure have not been squandered in vain in Afghanistan, but the global existential threat, the manner of foreign powers' leaving and the immense and pervasive fear on the ground all amount to a desperately concerning and unstable situation. Yes, the Taliban are inviting women to join the Government and offering a general amnesty, but they could, of course, be dissembling to steady the national mood and to give a nod to assurances made to the Americans. What the Taliban high command say at a global news conference and what younger fighters, intoxicated by victory, do in communities are scarily different things.

We could not maintain a presence in Afghanistan indefinitely. Not only has nation-building proved to be a particularly elusive goal, but the US President made it clear that it was not one he shared. However, we have to ask ourselves why, as per the chair of the Defence Select Committee, the biggest military high-tech alliance we have ever created was defeated by an insurgency armed simply with AK-47s and landmines.

We have to recognise that it was also armed with a powerful, compelling ideology, however disagreeable many aspects of it are to us. The West has no similarly potent value system to muster in response. Our hyper-liberal individualism is, by definition, incapable of inspiring concerted action against a common foe when there is no unifying concept but the importance of "me". The Second World War was the last time this country was united against forces of evil, standing alone and being ready to fight to the death for our values and freedoms. Then, the nation's Judaeo-Christian ethical underpinning and trust in God were far less threadbare than today, to our detriment.

Freedom of speech is fast becoming a meaningless concept in many western societies. Universities and institutions dictate rigid orthodoxies and ensure that people who deviate are hounded out of employment and cast beyond the pale. Yet, ironically, much effort in Afghanistan was focused on laying down deep seams of freedom in the national culture and sowing seeds about the importance of equality of opportunity for men, women and minorities.

The Taliban believe in a God; Christians believe in a God who values every life; whereas the root of secularism is simply a belief in the infallible "me". We despair of the chaos on the ground in Afghanistan, but the disintegration of our spiritual backbone blinds us to the chaos all around us, and to its inevitable end-point: the decay and decline of the West.

2.55 pm

Baroness Coussins (CB): My Lords, as a long-standing campaigner for the Afghan interpreters and a former member of the MoD's assurance committee for LECs, I appreciate the dedicated work of our teams on the ground, both civilian and military, over the past few years in trying to reach the most secure and fair outcomes for each case, first under the redundancy scheme and, lately, under ARAP, including relocating about 3,000 interpreters and families so far to the UK. The desperate need now for the UK to step up much further leads to several specific questions, which I hope the Minister can answer either today or urgently in writing.

First, how many interpreters and their families had already been granted permission to relocate to the UK before the Taliban took over but had not yet received their visas or had the chance to travel? What arrangements are in place to prioritise and expedite their relocation? What are the expectations and practical arrangements of the remaining embassy team for securing the safe passage of those families to Kabul and the airport, given that by no means all of them live in the capital?

Will all other former interpreters be guaranteed the chance of relocation—if necessary, by getting them immediately to a holding position in a safe third country while the security checks and immigration paperwork are processed, away from the direct threats inside Afghanistan? Will he also confirm that the Government will take equal responsibility for the interpreters whose employment we contracted out to a private company, and will he guarantee that no wives and children of relocated interpreters will be left behind?

Finally, will relocation also be offered to the 45 Afghan nationals who have been working for the British Council as school ambassadors, trainers and English resource centre managers? Are the MoD and the British Council working together to rescue those individuals? Given that the British Council was headquartered with our embassy in Kabul and is viewed as part of the British Government there, it would seem reasonable to assume that these 45 Afghans qualify for relocation and so should also benefit from safe passage, first to Kabul and then to a third country, while their paperwork is processed.

UK-based colleagues have already lost contacts with many of them and fear the worst. One who had already been cleared for relocation does not live in Kabul and is now trapped. He managed to send a message saying that he is in hiding in the ground under his house, in a deep and narrow hole without much oxygen. His mother throws down bottles of water when she can, and his wife is traumatised.

The US has expanded its relocation scheme to Afghans who have worked for US NGOs and similar bodies, as well as to their interpreters. Will the UK do

likewise, and will we help not just those who have worked for us as interpreters, journalists or educators but also the guards, cleaners, cooks, drivers and others, who will be just as much a target in the eyes of the Taliban?

2.58 pm

Lord Touhig (Lab): My Lords, this is a bleak day for freedom and democracy across the world. The great democracies of Britain and the United States have walked away from defending Afghanistan and its people, a people who, with each passing day, were coming to value a life that only freedom and democracy can bestow on humanity. Leaving these defenceless people to the mercy of the Taliban is a shameful act. What an epitaph for those in our Armed Forces who, when the order came, deployed to Afghanistan and gave their lives. Try telling those loved ones they left behind that their sacrifice was not in vain.

Who will believe us now when we proclaim the value of a free and democratic society and tell the oppressed around the world that freedom, liberty and democracy are worth fighting for? The Russians and Chinese will once again say that the West cannot be trusted. President Putin will exploit it for all he is worth. As the commentator and writer Edward Lucas said of Putin, he is decisive, we are not; he is willing to break the rules, we are not; he is willing to use force, we are not. As for the Chinese, they want Afghanistan's vast deposits of copper. I am sure that President Xi will not be put off by anything that the Taliban do.

By withdrawing US troops, not only has President Biden destroyed the hopes of people in a fledgling democracy but he has made the world less safe. If ever there was a country that knows how dangerous a less safe world can be, it is the United States. That is even more so now, as we approach the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

Here in Britain, we too know how a less safe world takes the lives of men and women on our streets, of children and young people at a Manchester concert and of a brave police officer guarding this Parliament. Britain fell into line behind President Biden. In doing so, our Government have increased the risk of terrorism globally. On Sunday, the Prime Minister said that the UN and NATO should work together to ensure that Afghanistan did not lapse back into terror, but our withdrawal has made it ever more certain that that will happen.

We helped the Afghan people taste freedom. We helped liberate women, who had been denied basic human rights. We helped children gain a future through education. Who now will protect Afghan women? Who now will ensure that children get an education? As a former Veterans Minister, I ask: who will keep safe those Afghans who helped our soldiers? Ask any veteran and you will be told of the vital intelligence support given to us by Afghans.

Britain and the United States have made a terrible mistake and there will be a price to pay. The legacy of our decision to leave Afghanistan in this way will leave the world less safe for our children. Harold Macmillan said:

"History is apt to judge harshly those who sacrifice tomorrow for today."

Perhaps he was thinking of the Old Testament prophet who, 800 years before Christ, said that they who sow the wind will reap the whirlwind. They are wise words, which leave me wondering when we will ever learn the lesson that they teach us.

3.02 pm

Lord Kirkhope of Harrogate (Con) [V]: My Lords, in a debate such as this with so many valuable and knowledgeable contributions, especially in this House, where noble Lords have relevant and deep experience, it is inevitable that whatever I say will either have been said before or be better expressed as the debate continues, so I am going to concentrate on two areas of concern.

First, it is right and proper that in these circumstances, as major players in Afghanistan in recent years, the UK should ensure that those who are now in danger, as defined by the UN Convention on Refugees, should be supported, including being safely provided with sanctuary. As the Minister responsible for our Bosnian refugee resettlement programme in the 1990s—a much smaller but important programme under UN auspices—I know how positively we can respond in such emergencies. Our NGOs, local authorities, educationalists and health and social services all went the extra mile then and I am sure that they will do so again now. The decisions as to who should get priority and sanctuary here should be based on need and categories must be determined. This should not simply be a matter of a numerical target. We must discuss with others, in the USA and Europe, how we can effect a successful programme. We have a proud record of accommodating oppressed people in the UK and we now have a chance to demonstrate it again.

My second point is made as a president of the West Yorkshire branch of SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity that offers support to serving personnel, veterans and their families and has done so for many years. The positive effects of their participation in Afghanistan should not be underestimated. We lost more than 450 men and women service personnel, whose families continue to mourn. Others were seriously injured and disabled. Some of those injuries are not obvious to see, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorders. The courage and commitment of these men and women must not be forgotten. However, our support must be in a tangible form. The Armed Forces Bill must be reviewed to ensure that the Armed Forces covenant is extended so that it recognises wider needs than at present and places greater responsibilities on national, not just local, government.

There are those who have served their country and there are families of those who died who now feel that their courageous service in Afghanistan was in vain. Whatever the current situation may be, the positive contribution to protection from terrorism and drugs and the social changes, including the emancipation of women and children, which even the Taliban will have difficulty in reversing, was worthy and worth while. Those who served can all be very proud of what they did. Our forces are forces for good, supporting freedom and democracy, and I hope that they will continue to be so.

3.05 pm

Baroness Sheehan (LD) [V]: My Lords, I listened with alarm to the words of the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nick Carter, on the “Today” programme this morning, when he said that maybe the Taliban should be allowed a grace period to show that they have changed. I respectfully suggest that while he and I can watch at a safe distance to see how their promises will pan out, the Afghani people who helped us with our mission on the ground in myriad ways, particularly women who visibly led in the quest to normalise education for girls and to establish images of women in the workplace, including the Afghan Parliament, await their fate with terror, as do minorities, journalists, legal professionals and aid workers. Who will come to their rescue if the Taliban’s promises are cast aside? What is there in the Taliban’s recent history that says that the most vulnerable can trust them? Nothing. Can the Minister assure the House that we will not employ a wait-and-see approach but will act with the utmost urgency to bring to safety the vulnerable women, girls and men who placed their trust in us?

I welcome the news that the Government will give safe passage to 20,000 Afghani refugees, but how was the figure arrived at? Even with the inclusion of the Afghanistan relocation and assistance programme, it is inadequate and risks leaving stranded many of those who helped us in good faith. The completely arbitrary five-year period for resettlement adds insult to injury and will endanger the lives of many. The Government must get a grip and display a greater sense of willingness and decency to do the right thing or risk shredding even further their reputation abroad.

I ask the Minister when we will be in a position to say to those whom we are hoping to resettle where they must head to for safe haven. Will the UN administer the process, as it has done in the Syrian resettlement process? The establishment of a safe corridor in negotiation with the Taliban is an essential prerequisite. Is that happening?

I end with a word about accountability. The Minister will know, as a fellow Muslim, that there is no such sentence as stoning to death for adultery in Islam. No one should be in any doubt that, if such a sentence is established in the so-called Islamic emirate that the Taliban speak of, it will be an affront to Islam. I ask the Minister: in our dealings with the Taliban are we making it crystal clear that all humans rights atrocities are anti-Islamic and that barbaric punishment such as stoning to death will be documented and action taken against perpetrators? We must make the Taliban fully conversant with Magnitsky-style sanctions.

3.08 pm

Lord Sheikh (Con) [V]: My Lords, we went to Afghanistan with the United States 20 years ago. I believe that we have achieved much in the country since then. We have built significant infrastructure and rebuilt the cities. The allies trained a military and police force of 300,000, but they capitulated rapidly and surrendered their arms. With the United States, we have spent a total of \$2.3 trillion. This sum shows the extent of our involvement. We should not have left Afghanistan in a hurry and handed everything to the Taliban. I think that there has been a flaw in our intelligence.

Furthermore, 454 British troops gave their lives to secure peace, security and prosperity in Afghanistan. What did all these young men and women die for? In addition, a number of our servicemen have been injured.

Our soldiers were fighting to disrupt the narcotics trade, which accounts for a significant part of the Taliban’s revenue. However, Afghanistan remains a large producer of opium and the Taliban can now supply drugs more extensively than ever before. Furthermore, our withdrawal could encourage extremism and inspire acts of terror worldwide. I ask my noble friend the Minister: how will our Government tackle the problems of security and the drugs trade?

We need to ensure that girls’ education and the status of women will not be harmed under the Taliban regime. Islam does not forbid women going into business or pursuing education.

The refugees are indeed in a desperate state. I am pleased to note that we have agreed to take 20,000 refugees, but can my noble friend confirm that there will be a clear process in place for dealing with the applications?

We need a global approach and to work with international partners. There is an immediate need to provide humanitarian aid, and the Muslim charities I know are providing help. Furthermore, we must ensure that all Afghans who worked for the British Administration are allowed to come to the UK. I have been approached by relatives of people who worked for the British Administration and who need help to get to the United Kingdom. Can my noble friend the Minister give me the name of someone who I can contact to discuss specific cases?

Can the Minister comment on what sort of relationship we will have with the Taliban and whether all considerations will be taken into account? Geopolitical implications are of paramount importance, with China and Russia ready to act on our withdrawal. The West is at risk of losing all influence in Afghanistan and severely limiting its operational effectiveness abroad. This cannot be allowed to happen, and we need to be proactive.

3.12 pm

Baroness Falkner of Margravine (CB) [V]: My Lords, enough has been heard today about why and how things have gone so wrong after such sacrifice by us and Afghans, so I want to concentrate on the here and now. I welcome the government announcement of the Afghan resettlement scheme. In that context, I need to record my role as chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. The EHRC is an “A status” institution under the UN system of national certification and, along with partner human rights bodies, has supported the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, AIHRC.

AIHRC has been a brave and singular critical voice, defending human rights in Afghanistan’s volatile, violent and complex environment. In the past year alone, it has lost several members of its staff and membership. Now, as many of these figures are known nationally and locally, they are easily identifiable for retribution due to their work and profile. Of 392 AIHRC staff, 90 have been identified as being at high or very high

risk from the Taliban, only—I stress “only”—because they have been prepared to defend women and girls and other victims of the Taliban’s cruelty and violence.

I wrote to the Foreign Secretary on Monday, requesting that, in addition to the chair, who I believe has been evacuated to the UK, other high-profile staff, who are in the greatest fear of their lives, should be given priority in the evacuation. The work of defending human rights in Afghanistan will have to continue—even, ultimately, only from the West. I hope the Minister will be able to give me some reassurance on this.

I also want to make a brief reference to BBC staff and other journalists braving it out in Afghanistan—in Kabul and its environs—to bring us the truth. What are the Government doing to facilitate the rapid evacuation and/or protection of journalists in Kabul and beyond, as they have pledged to do?

I want to close on the loss of western and US credibility. This matters, as the whole concept of deterrence is founded on believability—that your opponent will hold back as they believe that you will do what you say you will do. Who in East Asia now—Japan, under the US security umbrella, or Taiwan, facing an increasingly belligerent China—can depend on the US or the West for support? Which of the countries that are seeing the rise of Islamist terror, in Africa or the Middle East, will look to us for support? Both Russia and China will use this defeat to warn others who resist them that the West is an unreliable ally. The urgent task for the US, NATO and the rest of us is to stand steadfast, to demonstrate to our allies that we will learn from this disaster, and be firm in our resolve as we go forward.

3.16 pm

Lord Marlesford (Con) [V]: My Lords, whatever history’s verdict on the wisdom, conduct or shambolic conclusion of the 20-year war in Afghanistan, it is hard to overstate the consequences of the victory of the Taliban over the modern military might of the West.

The lightning speed of the Taliban advance may have had two causes. The first is the failure of the West to win the hearts and minds of the rural communities of Afghanistan. This was apparent 12 years ago, in July 2009, when the coalition launched Operation Panther’s Claw to clear the Taliban from Helmand province. Although by that time the coalition claimed to have trained over 90,000 Afghan troops, only some 600 Afghans could be persuaded to join the coalition force of some 15,000. Many of the others just melted away.

Secondly, once President Trump had done his February 2020 deal with the Taliban, the Taliban used the next 17 months for secret negotiations with many provinces to surrender without contest.

During our debate on the Queen’s Speech in May, I suggested that political Islam was one of the most far-reaching threats to global political stability and economic prosperity. Political Islam is that assembly of entities ranging from IS and al-Qaeda to the Taliban, largely schooled in the madrassas of Pakistan, which, in the shade of the Muslim Brotherhood, has hijacked the great Abrahamic religion of Islam to promote and justify jihad for a world caliphate with theocratic government under sharia law. Another Islamist Government

in Afghanistan will surely be seen as a further step towards a global caliphate. Britain is now in a much greater danger.

Finally, may I say that I view with concern the proposal of the National Muslim War Memorial Trust to erect in the grounds of the Imperial War Museum a memorial to the Muslims who fell in both world wars? Both were wars between nations, not religions or races. That is why such care was taken to make the Cenotaph in Whitehall so secular and so neutral. There may be separate memorials to the fallen from different nations, regions or even villages; that is different from one to the fallen of one religion. Surely this is not the time to erect on an important publicly owned site a potential shrine to Muslims who have died fighting. Can we risk something which could become a shrine to jihadists?

3.19 pm

Lord Boateng (Lab): My Lords, Afghanistan has historically long been the graveyard of imperial pretensions on the part of global superpowers, and the references that have been made in our debate today to the first Afghan war testify to that. One hundred and eighty years on, we are still wringing our hands. However, the difference today, and the tragedy of recent events, is that those events have dealt a mortal blow to the democratic hopes and aspirations of a substantial proportion of Afghanistan’s very own people. They are the ones who stand to lose most from what has happened in recent days and weeks. Surely it is our duty to them and to our own dead and injured, who we rightly honour today in this place, not to betray the values that we have espoused as universal as we depart that country and deal with the fallout from that departure.

We have suffered a profound political, military and diplomatic setback. There is no use pretending otherwise. No doubt there will be a time to look into the reasons for that, and it is important that we do so. However, we should all be able to unite now around our values and our belief in universal human rights and the innate dignity of each and every one of us regardless of race, creed or gender.

The central question for me is whether we will do all we can to mount an effective humanitarian relief programme for those who are left behind and extend a genuine welcome to those who are fleeing that country now, even as we speak. Will the Government reverse the cuts in overseas development assistance to NGOs and multilateral organisations delivering that humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan? The figure of 10% is simply not enough. We need full restoration and a real increase of resources to address this humanitarian catastrophe. Will the Government step back from what has on occasion seemed to be, and actually has been, a mean-minded policy towards refugees and think again about ensuring that we do nothing towards any group of refugees, not just Afghani refugees, that undermines the international rule of law in that respect, as they are undermined by the proposals that we are shortly to see enacted in this House in the Government’s new asylum policy? We need to be among the most, not the least, generous in that respect.

Specifically, will the Government undertake to halt all forced removals of existing asylum seekers to Afghanistan and abandon the pretence that was on

[LORD BOATENG]

the website only 48 hours ago that Afghanistan is now, or is likely to become in the foreseeable future, a safe country for that purpose? The reality is that we are not treating fairly Afghani refugee asylum seekers who are here in this country now. Will the Government undertake to do that and to restore their full rights to them in the knowledge that they cannot return to that country? Will they undertake that no Afghani asylum seeker will be housed in the appalling conditions that exist in the Napier barracks in Kent and that we will support the desire of local authorities up and down the country to provide decent accommodation for asylum seekers? They need resources to do that.

The reality is that we need a clear plan going forward. We need to ensure that as we depart Afghanistan we do not abandon those people and the values that we share with those who believed what we told them. We owe them that at least.

3.25 pm

Baroness Altmann (Con) [V]: My Lords, of course the UK could not stand alone once US troops pulled out. However, the chaotic withdrawal means that there is no prospect of holding the Taliban back. I fear that this hasty US withdrawal has far more serious implications for the West than the Vietnam exit, which was not a real threat to Britain or the US itself. This is an unmitigated disaster and proves that global Britain needs to partner with like-minded countries such as our European neighbours.

US citizens were understandably tired of foreign interventions, but this catastrophic situation exposes the dangers of applying short-term populist thinking to important long-term commitments. Today's leadership may have dangerously taken for granted the success of the West's presence in controlling Afghan extremists' terrorist atrocities. Can my noble friend say what assessment has been made of the implications for anti-terrorism protections in the UK and what measures are planned to counter rising narcotic dangers on our streets? The Taliban and other authoritarian regimes will no longer fear US military might or western sanctions, so domestic risks have risen inexorably. As so many noble Lords said, authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia will offer support to Afghanistan's Government without concerns for the fate of ordinary Afghans. This means that our precious values and way of life are more fragile today than just a week ago.

I too pay tribute to the bravery and dedication of our troops, local staff and aid workers and to those Afghans who helped us. In the name of humanity we must live up to our moral debt, as the most reverend Primate stated, to all those at risk in a Taliban Sharia state: Christians, other religious minorities, journalists and BBC staff there, as well as so many brave women now at risk, including those female judges who risked their lives to uphold our vision of the law, not the Taliban's version that is now to be imposed. What is the Government's estimate of the numbers of people involved here?

In closing, I urge greater appreciation of our western freedoms, which are often taken for granted: freedom of religion, equality, women's rights, respect for diversity. Most of us assume these values will always be there

for us. But we are not the global norm. Having worked so hard to build and maintain these values, it saddens me that so many in our country have criticised our past. It is tragic that today's western leaders, after encouraging other countries to adopt and aspire to our freedoms, have abandoned them too rapidly. Short-term populist thinking has meant that the US lost patience before the Afghan people were ready to live with our values. We are honour bound to help as many as we can.

3.28 pm

Lord Craig of Radley (CB) [V]: My Lords, a sense of strategic failure is widespread. It leaves me with feelings of great regret for the lives lost or harmed. But what a dreadful failure of intelligence, or failure to heed it if it was right, about the intentions and strength of the Taliban over the past few weeks. They were set on seeing all foreign forces out of their country, and they were enraged because it would not be in May. An armchair strategist could have predicted that they were bound to apply maximum pressure as the attention of the US and other allies was deeply focused on the final stages of withdrawal and force levels were right down. The need to increase strength on the ground so rapidly shows how ill prepared western nations were for this turbulent and messy final withdrawal.

In spite of the efforts made to train and equip the Afghan forces, too much false credence was placed on their will and morale to resist the Taliban, at least long enough for us to leave. They became ineffective, their morale failed the test, and the idea that the Taliban were defeatable does not accord with their persistent presence over past decades.

One must conclude that either out of fear, with genuine support or—given the endemic corruption in Afghanistan—through bribery, backing for the Taliban is much greater than expected. The advance became more and more pronounced, with all major cities and Kabul occupied in less than two weeks. Why did intelligence get all this so very wrong?

How will the Taliban turn their military conquest into political government? One must hope that they will have learned from the failure of their total disregard for human rights and their savage treatment of citizens during their time in power. Their approach this time seems less deplorable, but it is a gigantic leap from a fighting force with proscribed colleagues to one of recognised political authority in government. Whatever form of authority is established, it may be disrupted by endless disputes and internal conflicts with regional warlords, and those in authority one day may be overthrown the next.

With or without us, Afghanistan is a mess. Meanwhile, those who are rescuing or being rescued from Kabul need our fullest support.

3.31 pm

Lord McColl of Dulwich (Con) [V]: My Lords, this situation reminds me of the dark days of Dunkirk in more ways than one. The military events in France and the hurried evacuation of the British troops from Dunkirk were caused by the failure of the French army and the French Government, who refused to

fight, surrendered and then collaborated with the Nazis, as did most of the European continental countries to a greater or lesser extent. Did anyone criticise the United Kingdom Government for Dunkirk? Yes, they certainly did: the French were dishonest enough to blame the UK.

From 2003 it was NATO that led the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force—ISAF. Its mission was to help the Afghan Government to exercise their authority throughout the country and build up their national security forces. This was accomplished in December 2014 when the Afghans assumed full responsibility for the security of their country. In 2015, NATO started its Resolute Support mission to train, advise and assist Afghan security forces. The United Nations, NATO and a total of 49 countries have been involved in Afghanistan in the past 20 years. Why, then, do politicians single out and blame the United Kingdom?

Although President Biden has tried to shift the blame on to President Trump, that simply does not work. President Biden had the power to stop the withdrawal of the troops but failed to do so. To be fair, this situation may not be easy for President Biden to deal with because he does not seem to me to be in good health. There are many examples of the disease of a national leader having a disastrous effect on a country, a continent or even the world. How does the Minister react to this explanation?

It is regrettable that Secretary-General Stoltenberg of NATO failed to appear on the public scene until yesterday, and even then he was not very convincing. As NATO, the United Nations and the USA are held responsible for the fiasco in Afghanistan, is it not about time that politicians and the media stopped attacking our Government and directed their fire to those responsible for the chaos? The senior German politician Armin Laschet is to succeed Angela Merkel as leader of her party. He wrote yesterday that the chaos in Afghanistan is the greatest fiasco that NATO has ever suffered in its 70 years.

3.35 pm

Baroness Wilcox of Newport (Lab): My Lords, last Friday, the Prime Minister called a COBRA meeting and announced that there is no military solution. Tory MP Tom Tugendhat pointed out two days later that there was a military solution and that the Taliban had seized it. On Sunday there was a second COBRA meeting, with the line that the West has to tell the Taliban that nobody wants Afghanistan to become a breeding ground for terror again. It was too little, too late. The Taliban just walked into Kabul and took over.

There was no mention by the PM of the rights of women and girls or of LGBT individuals, democracy, education and human rights after 20 years of fighting for those things. There was no mention of the British troops who had fought there and no message for the families of the 457 British soldiers who died there. The UK Government did not disagree with the current Biden plan nor with the consequences of these actions which have now completely reversed the previous stability and, particularly, the major advances for the lived experiences of women and girls and minority groups.

However, it is welcome news that the Government will now reverse a previous decision and try to help 35 Afghan students get their visas as Chevening scholars. There continue to be real fears for their safety as a result of being chosen for this prestigious scheme, and the Government must ensure that they can safely leave the country to take up their studies.

The noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, is unable to speak in today's debate as she is en route to the Paralympic Games in Tokyo, but I am grateful to her for this fact: the historic first appearance of a female athlete from Afghanistan at the Paralympics will now no longer happen. Afghanistan was due to be represented by two taekwondo players at the Paralympics, Zakia Khudadadi, who was set to be the nation's first female Paralympian along with fellow taekwondo athlete Hossain Rasouli, but they can no longer attend and further restrictions likely to be disastrous for women's sport in Afghanistan will now follow.

Finally I would like the House to note the words of Wales's First Minister:

"We want Wales to be a Nation of Sanctuary and we'll do everything we can to support evacuations from Afghanistan. We're working with the Home Office and councils on preparations to support those who need it."

I trust that the Prime Minister agrees with Mark Drakeford's statement and that the Westminster Government will provide the ways and means to support those who have done so much on behalf of the UK Government and now seek their urgent and humanitarian assistance.

3.37 pm

Lord Bruce of Bennachie (LD): My Lords, from rereading the reports of the International Development Committee in 2007 and 2012, it is clear that we were in no doubt about the challenges facing not only the international community but the leaders and ordinary people of Afghanistan. Travelling across the country, we learned that corruption is rife, social values are deeply conservative, poverty is everywhere and the country is riddled with crime, violence and factionalism. Given that the Taliban regime harboured Osama bin Laden to execute major terrorist attacks, the case for going in was overwhelming. However, the minute the Bush regime prioritised the invasion of Iraq, it was clear that the resources Afghanistan needed would not be sustained.

Despite Afghanistan being a NATO-wide commitment, the US, as the biggest player, set the terms of engagement. This meant that donor co-ordination was less effective. The committee found that UK aid spending was several times more cost effective than that of the United States. We recognised that the commitment would be long term. We said that it would be a generation or more. It was not about building western style liberal democracy but helping to create a viable state with space for development and poverty reduction.

For President Biden to say that the collapse of the Government and the defence capability was the Afghans' fault is truly sickening. With limited allied troops and strategic air cover, the country was functioning, if imperfectly. The rapid withdrawal demoralised the domestic forces, who were often deployed far from

[LORD BRUCE OF BENNACHIE]

home with no protection or support for their families against the Taliban, so it is hardly surprising that they chose not to fight. Now the cost of failure could outweigh by many times the cost of maintaining a minimal presence. In the diplomatic fallout, what did the Prime Minister say to Imran Khan following his comments that the Taliban have “broken the shackles of slavery”?

Pakistan was supposed to be an ally.

The committee challenged President Karzai over the rights of women, 80% of whom said they experienced violence from their husbands or other male relatives, yet by contrast the principal of the university in Bamyān told us that the enrolment of women had increased dramatically after the defeat of the Taliban.

Our priority now is to offer protection and support for those who relied on promises from the international community and now experience the bitter taste of betrayal. The numbers and timings for refugees announced fall short of our obligations—will they be urgently reviewed? The international world order looks pretty dysfunctional today. The savage cut to the aid budget was appallingly misjudged—will it now be reversed? Afghanistan is poor; it needs aid and development focused on poverty reduction, especially for women and girls.

Yesterday, Taliban leaders, masters of public relations, sought to give assurances that women will be allowed education and other rights. If the Taliban is serious, which many doubt, it should accept the presence of outside agencies and delegations. Will the Government test their good faith? Will they engage and, as the noble Lord, Lord Jay, suggested, consider an aid and even a diplomatic presence? Otherwise, how will we reach the millions left behind?

3.40 pm

Lord Choudrey (Con) [V]: My Lords, I thank the noble Lords before me for their contributions. I am grateful to the Government for recalling Parliament so that your Lordships can offer advice to them in dealing with the very difficult situation in Afghanistan.

For the past five decades, the people of Afghanistan, through no fault of their own, have been suffering from violence, displacement, disease, hunger and deepening poverty. Some of this has been imposed on them from the outside. The Afghan economy has been ravaged by years of misrule and mismanagement. With high levels of infection and very low Covid vaccination levels, this has further deteriorated the already alarming Covid situation in the region. The influx of large numbers of unvaccinated refugees will put further pressure on the already stressed healthcare systems of Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries.

The people of Afghanistan deserve our empathy and support. The Prime Minister quite rightly said today that the UK has an “enduring commitment” to the people of Afghanistan. I also welcome the statement made by my noble friend Lady Evans about doubling the aid to Afghanistan. Given our historical ties and deep understanding of the region, Her Majesty’s Government are uniquely placed to play a leading role in encouraging the international community to provide immediate humanitarian aid in the first instance and

then to assist in formulating a sustainable development strategy, based on trade and investment, for the benefit of the people of Afghanistan.

The gains made in Afghanistan through the selfless sacrifices of our brave service men and women should not go in vain. We must use our considerable influence on the international stage and call for an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led development plan that would stimulate economic growth and create employment. A dignified, confident and self-reliant Afghan nation would benefit the whole region and help achieve the allies’ original objective, which was to establish a stable and prosperous Afghanistan as a responsible member of the world community.

3.43 pm

The Earl of Sandwich (CB) [V]: My Lords, many of us here have been lucky to visit Afghanistan, which, despite its troubles, remains one of the most beautiful and hospitable countries on earth. We tend to see the Taliban as a phalanx, but, in reality, it is a chequered movement, originally of students and mujaheddin, made up of many different groups. As Rory Stewart found on his famous long walk, there is a new regime on the other side of every mountain and, when the dust settles, warlords will continue to dominate—we must wait to see what coalition they come up with. Our response must surely be based on a multilateral consensus, through the UN.

It has been a privilege to work with a variety of Afghan NGOs over the years, most because of their ties with UK aid agencies. Let us not forget that aid workers can take risks and lose lives as often as soldiers. While some will be at risk now, others such as the Halo Trust, will decide to stay on, especially if they are seen and known to benefit local communities.

NGOs can and do already work in Taliban territory. I remember in particular an education programme in Badghis, where mothers trained as teachers so as to become less conspicuous. We will see a lot of compromises. People talk of wasted effort, but I feel that there has been so much change in 20 years that not everything will go backwards to pre 9/11. However, at this early stage, with some very alarming stories coming in, we should treat all Taliban PR claims with great caution. After all, the most extreme mullahs and fighters in rural areas will not necessarily pay attention to Kabul.

Meanwhile, refugees are rightly the world’s major concern. The sight of so many desperate men and women at Kabul airport has already persuaded Ministers of the necessity of a UNHCR resettlement scheme on the scale of the Syrian scheme. I welcome that, but can the Minister say whether we will now closely co-ordinate our response with that of the EU, as in the past? The ARAP scheme should be extended to civil society and include NGOs, journalists, the BBC and the British Council—anyone at risk because of their work on human rights.

Deportations of failed asylum seekers back to Afghanistan should of course cease, at least until the situation is more stable and individual cases can be reassessed. More immediately, once security at the airport is guaranteed and commercial flights build up, the Afghan refugees in most danger must be able to travel out of the country as soon as possible, perhaps through neighbouring countries.

Our entire aid programme will have to be reassessed. I expect the FCDO to attend to this as soon as possible, or when there has been some formal engagement with the new Government. NGOs that remain may very well become the best channels of UK aid.

Finally, I pay tribute to Alison Blake, our ambassador until June, who has worked tirelessly on behalf of the Afghan people.

3.47 pm

Baroness Warsi (Con) [V]: My Lords, many years ago when I made my maiden speech in your Lordships' House, I spoke about the rights of women in Afghanistan and the responsibility we had as a member of the allied force. As Foreign Office Minister with responsibility for Afghanistan from 2012 to 2014, I was involved in the negotiations of the political agreements, including the trilateral discussions between the United Kingdom, Afghanistan and Pakistan. I saw at first hand the work of our Armed Forces in Kabul, Helmand and more widely. As the proud mum of a child in our Armed Forces, I pay tribute to those who served so bravely and to those who paid the ultimate price with their lives. Three minutes is not long enough even to start to unpick our intervention and withdrawal. I sincerely hope my noble friend will commit today to a timely and thorough inquiry. However, for today, I have some specific questions.

What we have seen was entirely foreseeable and predictable. What consideration was given to averting this and what judgments were made that the obvious, which we are now seeing on our screens, was not going to happen? What representations did we make, if any, to stop the end of a relatively small but effective deployment, with little loss of allied lives since 2014? What efforts were made to persuade the US not to withdraw air support and what consideration was given to building a coalition without the US? What, if any, efforts were made to build that coalition?

The second thing that could come out of today's debate is for the Government to sharpen their approach and focus their mind on dealing with the current catastrophe over the next few days and weeks. I, along with many in this House, have spent the last week trying to arrange visas, exit routes and flights for Afghan colleagues and friends we have worked with, particularly women. While I appreciate what colleagues have tried to do, particularly my noble friend Lady Williams, my right honourable friend the Defence Secretary and in particular our ambassador Sir Laurie Bristow, ad hoc calls and personal pleadings cannot be the answer.

Can my noble friend detail in a written note, and place it in the Library today, the practical process for getting out those who will be killed if we do not act? It is a tragic failure of our Government and shame of our response that my colleagues and I are reaching out to colleagues in Qatar, Pakistan, Turkey and other countries to pick up and assist those who assisted us, to give refuge to those whom we let down and to protect those who supported us. We need our Government to act, not announce, and to act now.

3.50 pm

Lord Dubs (Lab) [V]: My Lords, we all saw the painful pictures on our television screens of what happened at the airport in Kabul. We have seen brave

Afghan women—judges, teachers, the Education Minister and members of humanitarian organisations—say what dangers they are in. They made me feel—and I am sure all other noble Lords feel the same—that we must not desert them.

Some years ago, thanks to my noble friend Lady Taylor of Bolton when she was Defence Minister, I was in a delegation that visited both Camp Bastion and Kandahar. I saw for myself what the British Army was doing and came away very impressed. At that time, the marines were in charge at Camp Bastion and I was very impressed by what they were doing. If President Biden felt obliged to pull out, surely he did not have to do so in such a hasty manner. Were we given any warnings or did we make representations to Washington that there should be a planned pull-out, so that we could protect the people who are in so much danger today? If Washington did not respond to our requests, it was a little slap in the face.

There are brave people working in many of the NGOs in Afghanistan. I recently saw David Miliband, the president of the International Rescue Committee, on the television. If the Government want to know more about Afghanistan, they could do worse than talk to him, as he has a large organisation of people working on the ground in Afghanistan.

What should we do now? We are told that 20,000 refugees from Afghanistan will be accepted by the British Government. Does that apply only to those currently in Afghanistan? What about those who have already escaped to neighbouring countries since the Taliban onslaught began? What about the refugees, particularly child refugees, who are now in Calais or the Greek islands? Will the 20,000 scheme cover them or will there be another? I am frequently asked why it is mainly young boys from Afghanistan who fled to Calais and the Greek islands. I have asked them this, and many of them give me a simple answer: if they had stayed in Afghanistan, they would have been compelled to join the Taliban and become a fighter. That is why they fled. Now there is a desperate need for family reunion, including where one family member is already here and desperate to have other family members, particularly sisters and parents, join them.

Will the Government urgently review the Nationality and Borders Bill, so that it does not become a criminal offence to arrive in the UK on a boat or dinghy across the channel? Will they give an assurance that there will be no returns to Afghanistan, as it is entirely unsafe? As the noble Lord, Lord Kerr, said earlier in this debate, it is wrong that Afghans and other refugees should have to wait so long for a decision.

Finally, I have a few questions. What about the Syrians who are waiting to come to this country, who are now in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan? Will they be allowed to come or will we forget about them? Will the Government report regularly on the situation with Afghan refugees? Will they tell us what has happened to the British Council and the World Service? I have two final points. Will there be any diplomatic representation in Kabul, so that some departures can be facilitated? What about our relations with Pakistan? They have to be looked at again.

3.53 pm

Lord Naseby (Con): My Lords, I have a deep and loving relationship with and understanding of south Asia. I lived in Pakistan, I lived and worked in India for several years and I lived and worked in Sri Lanka. I go to that part of the world as often as possible. These last few weeks have been a bleak time for western democracy there, particularly for the USA and the UK. I am reminded of partition and the horrors that took place then, once again against a time limit. It is my duty to ask a few questions. Was the UK at and a party to the various stages of the US statements of withdrawal—in February 2020, the review of 2021 and the withdrawal statement of 2021?

We still had on the ground in Afghanistan the Resolute Support Mission. Did it not know that the Afghan soldiers were not being paid properly? Was it not aware that the Taliban would mass against individual villages or small towns and make it quite clear to the mayor and the locals that either they gave in or they would be slaughtered? Surely that must have been communicated to someone in the United Kingdom Government.

Why on earth did we choose to replace our ambassador, Alison Blake, in June 2021 while this was going on? Would there have been any other UK person who was better briefed or had a better knowledge, having been there for several years, of what was actually happening on the ground? I find that an extraordinary situation.

I pay tribute to what Sir Laurie Bristow is doing on the ground now, but he had a very important role at home running COP for about a third of the world. Can we have an undertaking from my noble friend that he will stay in Afghanistan, or is he to be pulled back as well in a few weeks' time?

I know Pakistan quite well. It is a key country in relation to Afghanistan. The poor refugees who want to get out of Afghanistan will turn to Pakistan. We need to help Pakistan; we need to help India; we need to help Bangladesh and south Asia, and provide the resources to look after those refugees. We talk about 20,000; it will probably be nearer 120,000 or even a million coming into south Asia. What we are doing is only a drop—an important drop—in the ocean.

My noble friend mentioned UN involvement. I have my sceptical views on that. The UN is not very good at that sort of role.

The noble Lord, Lord Dannatt, called for a public inquiry. I think he is right. I hope, too, that dispatches from our ambassadors will be published openly, rather than our relying on a freedom of information inquiry perhaps from someone such as me. This is a really sorry time for the world, particularly in view of the real threat to the United Kingdom from terrorism.

3.57 pm

Lord Jones of Cheltenham (LD) [V]: My Lords, I know a bit about panic. I saw it when I was in Hong Kong after the Chinese fired on protesters in Tiananmen Square. I saw it when I was an election observer in the Gambia, when the police opened fire on opposition supporters, and I experienced panic of my own when a man with a sword attacked me in my constituency office and killed my assistant. The scenes in Afghanistan in recent days reminded me of those events.

There are almost 40 million people in Afghanistan. Those aged over 20 know what it was like living under the Taliban. Now they face it all over again after they had thought that we, their friends, and the Americans and others would stop the barbarism ever happening again.

I have met people from Afghanistan. I went to a village cricket match not so long ago where the local team played against a team of Afghan refugees—yes, Afghanistan is a nation of cricketers, just like us and their neighbours in Pakistan. One young man told me that he liked it in our village because the countryside and the hills reminded him of home. Afghans are just like us: they are people with hopes and aspirations. Now many of them are full of fear for the future of their families, their country and themselves.

We have a moral responsibility to accept as many refugees as possible—not just 20,000 over the long term, as the Lord Privy Seal said at the start of this debate. Some may apply to stay permanently. They will make a great contribution to our country. I hope we will be generous to them. Let us base our actions on the example we set with the Vietnamese boat people who fled from the Viet Cong. We settled whole families, first at Sopley in Hampshire, and then let them choose where they would like to live. Some came to Cheltenham and set up successful businesses—I know some of them and count them as personal friends.

Today, Afghanistan faces the triple threat of the pandemic, a climate change-induced drought and the Taliban takeover. It is our duty to do whatever we can to help those affected. When they arrive, we want no more “hostile environment” tactics from this Government. For starters, they can scrap plans in the Nationality and Borders Bill to criminalise and punish refugees. And, for another suggestion, why do not Mr Johnson, Mr Raab and Ms Patel go to see for themselves what is going on in Afghanistan?

Afghans are wonderful human beings. Many have had bad experiences and fear more of the same; we should welcome them and help them feel at home.

4 pm

Lord Jopling (Con) [V]: My Lords, we can only hope that the early protestations of the Taliban, promising reasonable, fair governance, will be realistic, though of course we have our doubts. I want to ask why it was that the irresponsible action by the United States to withdraw in the way that they did caused both them and us to be taken aback in surprise when the Afghan army collapsed so dramatically once it was left on its own. I think some of us were not surprised.

I say that because, some 10 years ago, the foreign affairs sub-committee of the European Union Select Committee carried out a study of the training and effectiveness of the Afghan police, which was reported to the House. Some of us, during that inquiry, found that this police force, which had been trained by the United States and its allies in NATO in parallel with the Afghan army, was highly deficient, to put it mildly. We felt it suffered from absenteeism, corruption, illiteracy, incompetence, irresolution and general disloyalty. Speaking for myself, I was not surprised when the army collapsed in the same way as I expected the police would also do

when confronted by the Taliban. I cannot believe that the allied military that trained the Afghan army did not have grave misgivings and were also not surprised at the collapse of the Afghan army. Nor can I believe that, as a consequence, the Governments of the United States and its NATO allies did not have adequate warnings of the dangers ahead if the Afghan army was left on its own.

I therefore have two questions. Can the Minister, when he winds up, tell us the extent of the forebodings fed back to the Government by the military that to leave the Afghan army on its own too suddenly would expose it as a paper tiger? If these warnings were fed back by the military—I would be surprised if they were not reported back in that way—then our Government have some explaining to do. The noble and gallant Lord, Lord Craig of Radley, made the same point. Likewise, if the military did not realise the fragility of the Afghan army, then it too has some explaining to do. In saying that, it must not be reflected as any criticism of mine on the outstanding courage of our forces in Afghanistan.

4.03 pm

Lord Woolley of Woodford (CB) [V]: My Lords, let me first say: shame on the noble Lord, Lord Robathan, for making cheap, divisive remarks in this debate about Afghanistan by claiming that Black Lives Matter is somehow against the interest of the UK. Black Lives Matter is about equality, diversity and decency—something that he lacked today.

Today, the slogans of “America is back” and “Global Britain” both sound shockingly hollow. We must take responsibility for the catastrophic and humiliating failure to the British soldiers who paid with their lives and, above all, the Afghan people, including the brave judges, the police, the army that we promised to support and the women and girls to whom we pledged we would give a future they were denied some 20 years before. We have failed the young, creative minds that will now be shackled due to the Taliban takeover without any precondition.

“Global Britain” was already sounding hollow when we decided to withdraw a promised £4 billion in foreign aid to some of the poorest people on the planet. Yesterday the Foreign Secretary talked about a 10% increase in aid to Afghanistan, but last month he made a cut of 78%. Urgent serious humanitarian aid is needed not only in Afghanistan but also in earthquake-ridden Haiti, which today is forgotten as we see the unfolding tragedy of Afghanistan. We can and must have a global Britain, but we have to step up to the leadership plate. Present-day Afghanistan is in part our mess, and we must take our responsibility.

I have three action points for the Minister. First, we need a resettlement package for refugees that is not just for thousands but for many tens of thousands and not just in five years but in one or two years. Secondly, we must not just reverse the £4 billion cut in foreign aid but add to that aid in this troubled world, which is exacerbated by Covid-19. Lastly, we must redouble our great British statesmanship, something that I feel we have abandoned. We must collectively work with our international partners—some of them are easier

than others, but they must include China, Russia and the Taliban. This time, our North Star should first and foremost be the Afghan people, which will be good for them and, ultimately, safer for us at home, too.

4.06 pm

Lord Suri (Con): My Lords, I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the current situation of the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan. The Taliban have been fighting in Afghanistan for many centuries. This week, they walked into Kabul and other provincial areas to claim them as their territory. The Taliban have been emboldened by this, which could lead to the imposition of their ideology, especially denying girls and women access to education and careers.

Such difficulties are also faced by non-Afghani residents. At one time, 500,000 Sikhs were living and working in Afghanistan, but that population is now considerably reduced to 3,000. Sikhs were subjected to discrimination and harassment. They were forced to wear yellow scarfs or aprons so that they could be readily identified as Sikhs. They were prohibited from fulfilling their religious ritual of cremation. To this day, it is forbidden to carry out a cremation; I understand that a deceased person was sent to Pakistan for cremation. During the civil war in the 1990s, several gurdwaras—Sikh temples—were destroyed. President Ghani sometimes claimed that Sikhs and Hindus were an integral part of Afghanistan. I urge our Government to engage with the nations of the world to seek a path where women—girls in particular—and minorities are not subjected to the hostilities previously inflicted by the Taliban.

4.08 pm

Baroness Royall of Blaisdon (Lab) [V]: My Lords, I share the horror, the despair and the incredulity about the situation in Afghanistan and the fear and the sadness about the danger and suffering of its citizens. Have we learned nothing from previous conflicts? I am ashamed. We have abandoned a people and their progress.

Despite the Taliban’s reassurances and their PR efforts in Kabul, the reality on the ground in the provinces is very different. They have stopped girls going to school and women going to work—not to mention the barbarous executions. I give one small example: a woman banker was ordered home by the Taliban and told that her brother should take her place. Have they really changed? What is their interpretation of Islamic law? As Malala said,

“I fear for my Afghan sisters.”

Women, especially the courageous women leaders and activists, are terrified—and so am I on their behalf. In a meeting a couple of years ago with Afghan women MPs, one told me that she was willing to die for democracy. I fear that she might.

The Minister knows of my specific concern about the safety of Afghan women and children who have been cultural ambassadors—in the spotlight as emblems of cultural change and promoters of liberal values. This includes women and young girls who have participated in cultural exchanges promoted by the UK Government to publicise British-assisted social progress in Afghanistan.

[BARONESS ROYALL OF BLAISDON]

I know the FCDO crisis team is aware of these young women, for whom I believe we have a responsibility, and I urge the Minister to ensure that they are able to leave the country.

We are in the midst of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis and the Government must respond with urgency and generosity. Five thousand refugees this year and 20,000 in the long term is simply not enough. As part of the resettlement scheme families must be reunited and, wherever they are settled in the UK, there must be adequate funding for the local authorities which will be expected to provide for them. We also have a duty to provide support to Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, which will receive by far the greatest number of refugees.

I pay tribute to our military and officials who are handling the hugely difficult situation at Kabul airport—a friend who was in the airport on Sunday said that it was quite extraordinary. Can the Minister please assure the House that they will stay until the vulnerable people have left the country? It must not be left to the Taliban to decide who can and cannot leave.

I urge the Government to expand the Afghan relocations and assistance policy to a new category which should incorporate those who are in fear of persecution, including academics. Universities and colleges up and down the country are willing to help by providing sanctuary and a place for academics to continue their careers, but they need to get out of the country safely. Will the Minister give an assurance that academics will be included in ARAP? I welcome the reversal of the decision on Chevening scholars and now hope that students and staff in Afghanistan, including those who are due to start next term, will have their visas accelerated so that they can come to the UK. Our universities are anxiously waiting to welcome them. Finally, as a supporter of Universities of Sanctuary, which includes Somerville College—my own college—and Mansfield College, I ask the Government to grant refugee status to all Afghan students currently in this country who do not yet have that protection.

4.12 pm

Baroness Morrissey (Con) [V]: My Lords, I declare an interest as the lead non-executive director at the FCDO. As all other speakers have done already, I despair at the horror unfolding in Afghanistan and the fear and panic we are witnessing, especially among its 19 million women and girls, but wringing our hands and beating our chests will not solve anything. We cannot stand by and watch this disaster worsen, especially since the manner of the allies' military withdrawal precipitated it. We must investigate the intelligence failings but the urgent priority must be to right our terrible mistake.

Today's debate will serve a really useful purpose only if it brings forward real solutions to alleviate the suffering of Afghans, prevents a resurgence of the terrorist threat to the rest of the world, and discourages other bad actors from exploiting our failure. This is a critical moment for the West. With the Biden Administration turning their back on the problem, Britain must show leadership, pressure the US and work with other NATO allies to form an effective plan. None of the alternatives are appealing. Let us

not be naive and expect to influence the Taliban through diplomacy. Those who force marriage on 12 year-old girls, and think nothing of beheading or torturing those who stand up to them, obviously have fundamentally different values from ours.

Make no mistake: the Taliban saying that women's rights will be protected as long as they follow sharia law effectively means that they have few rights, given their interpretation. The Taliban's opposition to girls' education is central to their religious ideology, and actions speak louder than words. The noble Baroness, Lady Royall, set out some examples, to which I would add that we have already seen pictures of women being literally whitewashed over, the reintroduction of the burka and house-to-house searches. Back in July, a House of Commons research report noted restrictions on girls' schooling in districts already controlled by the Taliban. Sadly, the Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme, targeted at the most vulnerable, can never be enough: 20,000 means millions more left behind.

To put right our wrongs, I am afraid we must be willing to reconsider military engagement to disrupt the inevitability of total Taliban control. I understand the great reluctance to do that, especially after all the sacrifices made by our brave military personnel, but we have no moral choice other than to sort this mess out. Renewed military intervention need not be the same type of operation as the one just concluded. It needs to show the new regime that we have not gone away and that we will protect the human rights of Afghan people as well as the broader values we stand for.

Whatever we do, it must have real teeth, otherwise any increase in humanitarian aid, and efforts to protect women's rights and to reduce violence and corruption, will fail in the face of a regime that is totally opposed to what we believe in and wishes to spread its appalling ideology across the globe. If we do not act, the world will be a less stable, more dangerous place, far beyond Afghanistan. Britain prides itself on being a force for good in the world; now is our opportunity to show it.

4.15 pm

Lord Roberts of Llandudno (LD) [V]: My Lords, we have seen clearly from this debate that we will have to look again at our immigration policy—but not according to the new Bill that is going through the other House at the moment, which is completely opposed to every sentiment expressed in this debate.

How able is the United Kingdom to accept and proceed with 5,000 new applications? We know that, already, the Home Office has a queue of people waiting for approval, or for their applications to at least be processed. Surely we cannot let this queue grow on and on. We have to look again at what we intend to do with the present and proposed immigration procedures.

I also suggest that, in accepting people here, we must make the most of what they are able to contribute. Already, we know that we are going to get a lot of interpreters—I am delighted to have them; they can help us proceed with those 5,000-plus, I hope, applications in the first year. They have a contribution to make. We must be ready to train our staff also. Have we got enough new staff in the Home Office to cope with all these new arrivals, not only from Afghanistan but from Hong Kong and other places?

We have to look again, and clearly we need a complete revision of what has, on the whole, been a hostile attitude towards immigration and new immigrants. I remember I did a fair bit of work on Syrian immigration, and I was so disappointed in the way that the Government responded to the need at that time. I hope this will not be repeated with the needs of the Afghan people.

4.17 pm

Lord Cormack (Con) [V]: My Lords, I have heard every speech in this very sombre and sober debate. One thing that has come out in almost every speech is the abject failure of leadership by the greatest of all democracies. That failure has made the world a much more dangerous place than it was even 10 days ago. The muddle, chaos and confusion of the last 10 days has given a boost to the power and influence of the second great power in the world, one which represents the greatest threat to democracy and human rights in Asia and Africa, following its belt and road initiative, and indeed throughout the world.

We have to face that fact that the bombast of Trump, followed by the ineffectual decency and demonstrably catastrophic incompetence of President Biden, has caused this terrible situation. The USA, guarantor of civilised values for the last century and more, stands humiliated before the world—and so do we. “Go it alone”, “take back control” and “global Britain” mean evacuating from Afghanistan without a coherent plan or a clearly defined purpose. Our future as a nation—a nation that still has some influence in the world councils—will depend upon our having such a plan and a purpose.

I agree with almost everything that has been said about handling the refugee crisis, but, as the noble Lord, Lord Jay, and the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Newnham, said, it is important that we keep our embassy in Kabul open and do everything in our power to sustain and protect those aid workers, BBC journalists and others who wish to stay. We should therefore table a resolution at the Security Council of the United Nations to test the good faith of recent Taliban statements, urging them to accept the presence of a United Nations peacekeeping force, a council of reference drawn from Muslim nations—particularly including those that have had women as Head of State—and another council, drawn from leading universities around the world, to ensure that women continue to receive a decent education in Afghanistan. These are absolutely vital issues, and I hope that, when he winds up, my noble friend will refer to our tabling such a resolution in New York.

We are going through a moment of shame at the moment, but we need an inquiry; I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Dannatt, and others. It should be a parliamentary inquiry, composed of Members of both Houses.

4.21 pm

Lord Pearson of Rannoch (Non-Aff) [V]: My Lords, the Taliban exist within Islam and its sharia law—they are Islamists. This brings us up against the problem of how we describe and distinguish between the vast majority of our own Muslims, who are peaceful and a great credit to our society, and their violent co-religionists.

We talk about “political Islam”, “radical Muslims” and “Islamists” when we refer to the violent type and about “Muslims” when we refer to our peaceful friends. This confusion is perhaps most on display in the concept of Islamophobia, which is an unhelpful word because it is not phobic to fear the modern world’s most violent ideology, as pursued by the Islamists et cetera.

The evil in human nature is also active today in China’s treatment of the Uighur Muslims and in the Buddhist Burmese treatment of the Rohingya. However, according to the religionofpeace.com website, in the 30 days before the recent Taliban success there were 182 deadly Islamist attacks in 24 countries, in which 1,084 people were killed, with 1,100 wounded. Since 9/11, there have been 39,849 such attacks worldwide, or roughly four every day. The vast majority of these attacks have been on other Muslims, but by no means all—Charlie Hebdo, the Manchester Arena, London Bridge and Streatham come to mind. In the three years to 2014, more than twice as many British Muslims went to Iraq and Syria to wage Jihad than joined the British Army. Staying at home, the Batley schoolmaster remains in hiding for his life, just because he showed his pupils a picture of Muhammad.

So I submit that it is not phobic to fear Islam, which is responsible for by far the most violence on our planet today. However, if we so much as even try to learn and talk about Islam, we are immediately called Islamophobic by the Muslim Council of Britain, Tell MAMA and other suspect organisations, yet we can say what we like about any of the world’s other religions and nobody turns much of a hair.

However, there is good news, too. The Abraham Accords are holding up, and the Grand Mufti of Egypt has recently issued a fatwa, declaring that the Islamist terrorists are criminals, in which he is supported by over 100 leading muftis worldwide. This is a landmark event. More and more Muslims are coming into the open with interpretations of Koran that put it into a modern context and deny its Islamist interpretation. Some of them are in this country risking a death penalty. The burden of my story today is to ask the Government and our security services to watch over them and so help them to further their purpose. The future of our civilisation may depend on that.

4.25 pm

Baroness Gardner of Parkes (Con) [V]: My Lords, the very large number of speakers on this subject has been matched by the high number of speeches about different aspects of it that have presented widely varying problems. Clearly we are not all satisfied with the present system, and we favour managing and overcoming future difficulties. The personal messages I have had show that the disempowering situation for women is the greatest cause for concern. Certainly this matter has been raised many times among the almost 90 speakers before me.

Under the former Taliban regime, girls were blocked from attending school and women were largely banned from appearing in a public place without full body covering and a male escort. The 120 speakers on today’s list show us the great interest in this subject and the speeches have been wonderfully wide-ranging. The noble

[BARONESS GARDNER OF PARKES]

Lord, Lord Alton, spoke about women who have status or a major qualification and who go in fear of being treated in a way that shows almost opposition to their not having education.

There is another message that I would like to express. The noble Lord, Lord Boateng, spoke about the money that is sent by the Government as foreign aid. That is very valuable and important, but having been chairman of a charity working throughout all the poor countries of the world for a long time—20 years, I think—I found that it is no good sending them aid without telling them what to do with the articles. You can visit these places and they have piles of wonderful medications on the ward and no one has any idea of what to do with them. The same happened where we had an orchard. The children had lessons there with a pile of timber beside them. The timber was to give them a prefab school, but no one knew what to do with it. We have to be helpful and do what we can to see that some expert is available to provide the necessary information.

There is an awful lot more to be said on this subject, but the time I am allowed has run out, so I simply have to hope that this will be taken up by our Government and looked into in much more detail.

4.28 pm

Baroness Bakewell (Lab): My Lords, I join those who have already spoken of their gratitude to those who have contributed so much in the past 20 years in Afghanistan, but I want to speak on what actions we can take at once in this country.

The Home Office will have to recalibrate its whole approach to refugees. Its shortcomings have been evident for many years to many groups seeking to help those fleeing persecution. Women for Refugee Women, Human Rights Watch and the Refugee Council all bear witness to that. In 2015, a British court ordered that deportations to Afghanistan be suspended because the country was unsafe. The Government had that decision reversed on appeal. The UK has slashed aid to Afghanistan by many millions in recent years, indicating to our allies a retreat from the world stage. This entire mindset needs urgently to be reversed.

As the noble Lord, Lord Newby, and others declared, the Home Office should now offer an amnesty to all Afghan asylum seekers already here and make it easier for families to be reunited. Emergency visas should be made easily available to those most at risk. Paperwork must be minimised. Home Office actions must support the many words spoken today. Britain's offer of asylum to, at most, 20,000 over five years is not fast enough—or enough; 5,000 now will not meet the immediate demand.

Much attention has already been paid—rightly—to the plight of women under the new Taliban Government. When they offer reassuring words, we need to judge by actions. There are more than 1,000 women journalists in Afghanistan, 100 BBC staff, many hundreds of women practising law, and, as the noble and learned Lord, Lord Judge, tells us, 300 female judges. A high percentage of university students in Afghanistan are women—as many as 60% of the students at Herat University. They are rightly making their voices heard but we must not neglect the voiceless—the poor women

and the women in minority groups. For example, 85 girls killed at a school in Kabul a few months ago were Hazaras. Hazara girls and widows are forced into slavery and child marriage. We must not prioritise the elite at the expense of the poor. Both need our active and immediate support. I hope that this Government will give it.

4.31 pm

Baroness Uddin (Non-Aff) [V]: My Lords, my heart goes out to all those who have lost their loved ones, both our own troops as well as Afghan civilians. The Taliban is back as we end the 20 years of our incursion and occupation. While we speak of the remarkable achievements we may have made—aside from the colossal disaster unfolding before our eyes—the vast majority of Afghans may never have experienced or will never experience these remarkable changes in their country.

As a former officer of the all-party parliamentary group, I had the privilege of working with many women leaders post 9/11 so I feel an obligation to speak today. Why did we not prepare for the consequences of our proposed plan to withdraw? Why and how could our intelligence services and political leaders not forecast the Afghan Government falling so cataclysmically? Recriminations aside, our responsibility for scrutiny must be heightened as the mess continues to unfold.

What plans are in place for rescuing all the men and women who wish to escape who worked alongside western regimes, including the NGOs, as well as judges, political leaders—male and female—cricketers and artists? We again stand to create a legacy failure for the next century. We cannot say that history did not teach us the repercussions of our military and strategic foreign policy disasters, not least as Kashmiris, Palestinians, Iraqis, Libyans and people in countless African countries continue to glare at us, seeking justice and international resolutions for their ongoing conflicts—British intervention failures as we abandoned millions of citizens battling horrific civil wars and conflicts not prevalent on that scale prior to our intercession.

I contend that, like in other failed nations, the people of Afghanistan—ordinary Afghans—will question our motives for shock and awe and consider that it could have been about helping to improve democratic structures or empowering all women, not just those who worked with us or were “with” us. Masses of people, including women, have continued to suffer gross poverty while corruption remained embedded and the elites enjoyed western funds, stripping away Afghan resources, for 20 years. Even the opium flooding our markets was under our watchful eyes.

Afghan civilians have swum in blood, tears and fears as a result of western incursion and occupation. Leaving aside any future inquiry, we need to respond now to evacuate all those who are awaiting our rescue plans. I agree wholeheartedly with the noble Baroness Lady Amos, and the noble Lords, Lord Boateng and Lord Woolley; I echo their sentiments to the letter and the word.

What strategic plan is in place to—

Baroness Sanderson of Welton (Con): My Lords, I remind the noble Baroness of the speaking time advisory limit.

Baroness Uddin (Non-Aff) [V]: I am finishing. What strategic plan is in place to ensure that local authorities have sufficient funding to meet the needs of housing and education as well as mental well-being services?

4.35 pm

Lord Green of Deddington (CB) [V]: My Lords, this has been a very interesting debate, and I add just two points. One is a warning note on military interventions and the other concerns the possible future scale of asylum claims from Afghanistan. First, I suggest that we must be much more careful in future about military interventions in foreign countries, especially in the Middle East. The liberation of Kuwait was certainly successful, perhaps because it was a relatively limited operation in both time and scope, and because it had full support from the people of that country. Since then, we have had Iraq, Libya and, I would add, Syria. All of them have largely failed. Having served for 15 years in the Arab and Muslim world, including as ambassador in Syria and Saudi Arabia, I have concluded that those outcomes were mainly because we fail to understand the internal dynamics of those very complex countries. I support the calls by other noble lords for a wide-ranging inquiry—and the sooner the better, so that lessons can be learned.

Secondly, of course we should grant asylum to those who have worked directly for us, together with their families; the same should also apply to female judges and officials, as the noble and learned Lord, Lord Judge, pointed out, but we need to be careful. The scale of further applications from Afghanistan could be huge. The Afghan population is now about 40 million, and there are a further 5 million who are refugees, mainly in neighbouring countries.

The British Government recently made a promise of eventual settlement in the UK to 4.5 million people from Hong Kong. Meanwhile, our own society is already struggling to cope with massive levels of immigration, which has averaged 300,000 a year. That is despite 10 years of promises to reduce it. This has driven population growth of 7 million in the past 20 years, placing considerable strain on our social cohesion.

The noble Baroness, Lady Casey, pointed out in a 2016 report that there are

“worrying levels of segregation and socio-economic exclusion in different”

areas of the UK. She is right. The Government should be very careful about adding to our difficulties in this very delicate area.

4.38 pm

Lord Balfre (Con): There are one or two facts we might like to face. First, what has happened is quite predictable. President Trump announced the withdrawal from Afghanistan; President Biden confirmed it. We knew it was coming; we just do not seem to have prepared very well for it. Secondly, President Biden is accused of not talking to his allies, but what have they to say? “Please don’t do it”, is all they would have said. If I were him and sitting in Camp David, I would have said, “Let’s not waste our breath. We know what they are going to say.”

Thirdly, the United States is fully within its rights to withdraw. We have to face the fact that, as has been said, we in the United Kingdom, or even in the EU, cannot mount a mission on our own without the United States. We are dependent on the United States where the mission goes. There were 90,000 US troops out of 130,000 at the height.

My noble friend Lady Morrissey talked about values that we may have to live with. We are going to have to talk to the Taliban; we may not like it, but if we do not, we will have the entire Afghan middle class as refugees. That is the reality. We have to talk to the Taliban; that is why we have a Foreign Office. As Margaret Thatcher famously said, the job of the Foreign Office is to talk to foreigners. I suggest that the Foreign Office should settle down, start to make some contact with the Taliban and talk to them about what their plans for the country are, because it will still be there, right on the edge of all our concerns.

The point has also been made that Afghanistan was the first NATO Article 5 operation. Yes, it was, because we could never agree on an Article 5 operation anywhere near Europe, and I predict to noble Lords that we could not do so now. If Russia decided to move against the Baltic states, we might just about get an Article 5—but if it moved against Ukraine, I am not sure the Baltic states would support an Article 5, because they would be worried about themselves.

The biggest job for the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence in the coming time is to start to talk seriously in Europe about what we want to achieve in the world. This is where my noble friend Lord Cormack was absolutely right. We talk about “taking back control”, but we have not—we have abandoned our international duties. It is about time that the Foreign Office got back to its job of talking to foreigners and looking after British interests.

4.41 pm

Baroness Sherlock (Lab) [V]: My Lords, I endorse all that my noble friend Lady Smith and so many noble Lords have said about the horrors unfolding in Afghanistan, and about our responsibility to act. With so many people desperate to flee, it is good that there will be a resettlement scheme, but it needs a scale and urgency that are so far missing. Ministers also need to be flexible in their response to Afghans at risk who could not wait for help from a scheme as yet unborn but fled by whatever means they could find, like generations of refugees before them. That is a reminder of why the world needs the refugee convention and why we should do nothing to undermine it.

I hold the higher education brief, so it falls to me to ask specifically about Afghan students. The Minister will have seen the letter sent to this year’s Afghan Chevening scholars, saying they could no longer come to Britain as the British embassy in Kabul did not have the resources to process their paperwork. The letter acknowledged that this was disappointing but said that they could defer until the next academic year. This letter came while Afghanistan was in meltdown. Some of these students are women. Did the FCDO think that they could just take a gap year and then maybe ask the Taliban whether it would be okay for

[BARONESS SHERLOCK]

them to fly to London to take a master's programme next September? This really raises some questions about grip.

I welcome the U-turn and the assurance from the Lord Privy Seal that the Government are “doing everything possible to accelerate the visas of the Chevening scholars”.

However, the delay will have made things more difficult and dangerous. These students have been identified as future leaders and are therefore an obvious target for any radical group. So I ask the Minister: what is being done to ensure their safe travel to the UK? Are they being guaranteed a place on a British flight out of Afghanistan? If so, how will they be supported to reach the airport safely?

More widely, how many Afghan students are presently in the UK? What support will be given to those who do not feel it is safe to return home? Will they be eligible for resettlement or will they apply for asylum in the usual way? What will happen about visas for students due to join or return to higher education courses here?

The British Council in Kabul plays a key role in administering the Chevening programme. The Minister will know that in 2011 the British Council in Kabul was attacked by the Taliban, which led to 12 fatalities. British Council staff are extremely vulnerable, as the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, has already pointed out, yet it seems that school ambassadors and other locally engaged British Council staff are still not automatically included in the scope of our relocation and assistance policy. Can the Minister clarify whether that is true? If so, can he assure the House that steps will be taken swiftly so that all British Council staff will be supported?

Like many others, I have wept more than once while watching the television coverage in the last week. The thing is, Afghans do not need my tears; they need our help—practical and urgent help—and they need it right now. Let us step up to the plate and give it to them.

The Deputy Speaker (Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall)

(Lab): My Lords, the noble Lord, Lord Horam, has withdrawn from the debate, so I call the noble Baroness, Lady Bennett of Manor Castle.

4.45 pm

Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (GP) [V]: My Lords, it is a great pleasure to follow—unexpectedly—the noble Baroness, Lady Sherlock. My noble friend Lady Jones of Moulsecoomb has already focused on our essential responsibility to provide refuge for the people who served us and to whom we promised safety. In the other place, Caroline Lucas highlighted how the Government's planned Nationality and Borders Bill would criminalise

“a woman fleeing the Taliban with her children”—

an intention the Home Secretary has reportedly confirmed since my Green colleague spoke.

In my brief time, I will follow the noble Lord, Lord Newby, in looking at the bigger picture, given that we now have to make an urgent root-and-branch

review of our nation's place in the world. Of immediate import is to end exercises in US-inspired sabre rattling, as was said by the noble Lord, Lord Lamont. As the noble Baroness, Lady Helic, said, the integrated review of security, published just in April, is already hopelessly outdated.

The tragic events in Afghanistan are a powerful indicator of the post-hegemon world in which we live. We must never again see the UK blindly following the US, particularly into war, but also into other dangerous international policies. The UK should be working through international institutions, within the rule of international law, and with likeminded nations to strengthen and support these mechanisms. That can start by working to rally the international community to present a common front to the Taliban, demanding respect for human rights and democracy.

Next, the UK needs to stop pumping out weapons into a world awash with them. The Taliban is now extraordinarily well armed. Of the \$83 billion the US spent on Afghanistan's army and police, a very large percentage was on weapons, now largely in Taliban hands. In the past decade, the UK has licensed the sale of £16.8 billion-worth of arms to countries classified as “not free”. The standout, obvious disaster is Saudi Arabia. Since the war in Yemen started, the UK has licensed the sale of £20 billion-worth of arms to it. The uses to which our weapons are now being put by Saudi Arabia are indefensible, but, when regimes such as this fall, as such regimes always fall, where will those weapons end up? They will likely be in hands such as the Taliban's. We must stop being arms pushers.

Finally, there are our nuclear weapons, which were acquired in the Cold War, now a long-gone era. I can only assume that, when the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Houghton of Richmond, referred to

“totemic platforms of a bygone age”,

he had those weapons in mind. They are of course irrelevant in the Afghan crisis. They keep us in the club of nations that have hideous weapons of mass destruction, while their use is unthinkable. We could take a major positive step towards a new geopolitical order by joining the majority of the world's nations in backing a ban on nuclear weapons. More modestly, we could join the pushers for no first use, and to end the sole authority for use, which left so many terrified in the last days of the Trump presidency.

On a final note, coming back home, what extra help are the Government going to provide to veterans who served in Afghanistan, and those still serving, to deal with the shock of this month's events? This is a huge issue, as the noble Baroness, Lady Taylor of Bolton, highlighted.

4.48 pm

Lord Macdonald of River Glaven (CB) [V]: My Lords, I briefly echo some words spoken in the opening stages of this debate by the noble and learned Lord, Lord Judge. Among the bravest of those involved in the creation of some semblance of just law in Afghanistan in recent years were its women judges. Admired by jurists around the world, despised and feared by the Taliban, hated by those members of the Taliban whom they convicted and sentenced, these extraordinary figures

now face the greatest and most imminent peril. This is precisely because they conducted their work in open court before the public gaze, as any decent, self-respecting judge would. In question now is not so much their self-respect but ours. What will our country, a safe harbour and international advocate of judicial independence, do to help those who are perhaps its most courageous contemporary practitioners?

I can do no better than to quote the president of the International Association of Women Judges:

“The IAWJ urges governments to include the Afghan women judges and their families, who are in such a desperate and precarious position, in the special measures extended to interpreters, journalists and other personnel ... By serving as judges and helping develop the Afghan judicial branch, women judges have helped establish the rule of law in their country ... Allowing them to be at the mercy of the Taliban and insurgent groups, given what they have sacrificed, would be tragic indeed.”

I add only that it would, perhaps, be not so much tragic as shameful.

Our country has some claim to be the birthplace of the rule of law, and we certainly proselytise for the rule of law around the world. So, like the noble and learned Lord, Lord Goldsmith, I urge the Minister to confirm in his reply that the brave women judges of Afghanistan will be among those groups offered succour and refuge by the United Kingdom.

4.51 pm

Lord Udney-Lister (Con): My Lords, the invasion of Afghanistan—a combination of regime change, although yesterday President Biden said that the USA was not in the business of nation building, and the need to stop al-Qaeda and to confront its leaders after 9/11—was quickly followed by the second Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq with no clear endgame other than regime change and a failure to think through what would happen when we won. We saw the total dismantlement of the Baath Party and anyone involved in government, and we left a vacuum that we have struggled to fill ever since.

In both cases—Iraq and Afghanistan—we, the West, poured in resources to build new Governments and created new armies to police the country. In both cases, these armies were in trouble as soon as western support was withdrawn. The parallel between the collapse of the Iraqi army when faced with ISIL, and the collapse of the Afghan army in the face of the Taliban, is frighteningly similar. It is not that these armies were populated by poor people, and many had been fighting the Taliban for many years with great bravery and had paid a terrible price with the loss of troops. In both cases, however, they struggled to handle a well-motivated opponent and were saddled by weak politicians, who, in turn, had done nothing to stop corruption and political patronage within both the military and the Government.

We cannot now walk away and say that it was only a matter of time until the Afghan Government collapsed without western support. The Trump Administration undermined the Afghan Government by negotiating directly with the Taliban. Again, little thought seems to have been given to what would happen as the USA left. We and others went in there to support a US-led invasion and, from what I can see, were never part of these negotiations.

We must now, as a House, ask what government policy is in Afghanistan. President Biden might not want to do nation building, but we will not deal with the terrorist threat until we help Afghanistan create a stable Government who are free of corruption and recognise that it is not in their people's interests to harbour terrorists. This is going to be a long journey and one that, regrettably, I suspect, will not be achieved without future intervention at some point. I do not think that anybody believes that Afghanistan will not be a new home for ISIL, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. They are there already and are not going to be leaving any time soon.

Most immediately, we need to be assured that we have an anti-terrorism monitoring and intervention capacity in that part of the world. As we have closed all our bases, I struggle to know how we are going to do that. To do this, we must start to engage with our friends and look at opening up direct links with the Taliban and start negotiating, as has already been said. For that, we are almost certainly going to need an embassy, which will be no easy task. Recognition of the Taliban as a Government, which will come in due course, must come at a cost, and that cost has to be in curtailing terrorism, curtailing drug exports and becoming a worthy member of society.

4.55 pm

Lord Strasburger (LD) [V]: My Lords, I shall not repeat the many calls for urgent humanitarian action articulated by most of the previous 99 speakers around the House, which of course I support. In the short time available, I will focus instead on one issue—why? Why has the manner of our withdrawal been such a shameful shambles? Why is our nation's previous reputation for integrity and reliability now shot to pieces? Why is nobody likely to trust the word of the United Kingdom any more, whether they be a war zone interpreter or world leader?

The answer comes down to leadership, or lack of it. What qualities do good leaders have? As well as integrity, vision and values, there is a key one: being able to spot threats and make hard decisions to mitigate them promptly while there is still time to affect the outcome. Throughout last week, it was abundantly obvious to anyone who followed the news that the Afghan army had collapsed, that the Taliban were advancing rapidly and unopposed, and that the forecasts of how long Kabul could hold out were wildly optimistic. That should have triggered emergency action by our Government but there was none.

The Foreign Secretary has pleaded that nobody could have predicted this. He should have said, “Boris and Dominic didn't spot what everybody else could see.” It was a huge opportunity squandered. That lost week was crucial for rescuing British nationals, the interpreters and other supporters of our mission and their families, as well as Afghan women and girls, who rightly fear for their future under a Taliban regime. Instead, the Government belatedly sprang into action when the Taliban were already surrounding the airport and only a few of those needing to escape can now do so—a classic case of shutting the stable door.

However, we should not be surprised. The Prime Minister has plenty of form on procrastinating until it is too late, presumably while he establishes which

[LORD STRASBURGER]

option will do the least damage to his popularity rating. In the Brexit trade negotiations, he frequently postponed the difficult decisions about the Irish border, repeatedly kicking the can down the road, and, as a result, in a last-minute stitch-up, we are saddled with an unworkable protocol that he himself now repudiates.

In spring last year, he dithered for weeks over calling the first lockdown and, in the autumn, over blocking travel from India to prevent the new variant taking hold. The result in both cases was an increase of many thousands in the number of Britons who became ill and died. That fatal indecisiveness is not new and is part of a pattern. The sad fact is that we have a Prime Minister who is temperamentally incapable of acting until after the chance to make a difference has gone. That is why we have this latest disaster. That is not leadership but a leadership vacuum, and it is costing our country dearly. While that situation persists, our country's future is precarious and, sadly, more humiliation is on the way.

4.58 pm

Lord McConnell of Glenscorrodale (Lab) [V]: My Lords, I salute the bravery of those who served in our Armed Forces and those of our coalition partners, as well as those who worked for local and international charities in Afghanistan, the diplomats and others who served our country so well over these past 20 years—particularly the past two weeks—and the Afghan women who, in the past few days, have said publicly that they will not give up the fight and will stand and fight to continue their work in education and government. I salute their bravery absolutely. I also note my declaration in the register.

I have felt sick, in the course of the last few days, at the situation as it developed, but I felt particularly sick last Friday. A friend in Kabul, who I had been corresponding with over recent weeks, was sending messages telling me of family members who had disappeared in Kandahar and other areas, presumed dead, and of family members who had fled when they discovered that their girls were on the lists of those whom Taliban fighters were looking for to marry off to Taliban fighters. I was sick to hear of her and her family's fear for what might unfold in the days to come. The last message I got from her, on Friday, said that she was trying to organise a way out but that if Kabul fell to the Taliban, her family would have to take her underground, but she would continue to provide me with updates. I have not heard from her since.

This terrifying, horrific situation we have seen unfold over recent days has been 18 months in the preparation. But only the Taliban has prepared for it. Our Government have serious questions to answer. The Americans may have made the big mistake, but our Government and the other coalition partners have been party to discussions in the G7, the United Nations and NATO over recent months that surely must have included this on the agenda. To have sat back over these 18 months and not prepared for this at least likely outcome is a great failure on the part of Ministers—perhaps also on the part of those who advise them.

There are huge questions that need to be answered if we are to learn lessons from this immediately—not after a long inquiry, but immediately—and ensure that

our government and its administration are fit for purpose in the months and years ahead. Were the Government advised just a few weeks ago that this was at least a possibility in the days and weeks following the rapid withdrawal? If they were advised of this, did they ignore that advice? If they were not advised of this, why do those advising them not have the knowledge and expertise to give better advice? If government Ministers ignored that advice, what on earth were they doing over these last few weeks as this situation unfolded in front of us? These questions need to be answered right now.

It cannot be that the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister or anyone else in government hides behind announcements or generalisations. We and the people of Afghanistan deserve to know—

Baroness Evans of Bowes Park (Con): I am afraid the noble Lord has gone well over his time. Can we hear from the noble Baroness, Lady Mobarik?

5.03 pm

Baroness Mobarik (Con) [V]: My Lords, like other noble Lords, I too refer to the recent report of the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Select Committee, which stated that the UK has shown little inclination

“to exert an independent voice on policy on Afghanistan. Instead, the UK has followed the lead of the US, and has been too reticent in raising its distinctive voice.”

It is time for the United Kingdom to have confidence in its own instincts and in raising its own voice. After all, the UK has a long history with and knowledge of not just Afghanistan but the whole region.

It is also time to treat regional allies with respect—something that has been distinctly lacking from the US. Allies such as Pakistan have been on the front line and have paid a very heavy price, both in economic impact and loss of life, over these past four decades as allies of the West. This should be acknowledged. Instead, the United States has used such allies as scapegoats to distract from its own failings. The United States, and we too, must show some humility and rationality after the events of the last few days. The fact that Pakistan was excluded from the UN Security Council's sessions on Afghanistan on 16 August beggars belief. It has a greater understanding of the Taliban and its mindset, and the political and religious dynamics of Afghanistan, than any other country. After all, it has had to deal with the FATA region within its own borders.

Conscious of the kind of murderous acts that the Taliban committed within their own and neighbouring countries, such as the brutal murder of 141 schoolchildren in Peshawar in 2014, it is difficult for me to say this, but they must be dealt with tactfully. I do not refer to formal recognition, which is a matter for our Government, but tactful engagement. The stark reality is that it is the Taliban who are now in charge in Afghanistan.

Despite Taliban assurance that everyone will be afforded safety and security, many are fleeing. Many thousands of refugees have already passed through the Spin Boldak-Chaman border crossing into Pakistan in the past few days. Chaos and catastrophe are unfolding as we speak. Pakistan and other neighbouring countries

will no doubt be more than concerned about terrorists and their warped interpretation of a great religion entering their borders under the guise of refugees.

We have to admit that, despite the noble efforts of our service men and women over the past 20 years, and despite achievements in certain spheres such as education and health, things have hardly been a resounding success for Afghanistan's economy. It is still one of the poorest nations on earth, corruption has been left to fester, and narcotics production under the recent Afghan Government was at an all-time high. As things move forward, it is incumbent on the international community to help build Afghanistan's economy sustainably, for even more than aid, which will be necessary, it is a strong economy which will bring political stability, and ultimately peace and prosperity, to the ordinary men, women and children of that country.

5.06 pm

Viscount Waverley (CB) [V]: My Lords, advocating and defending principles is honourable, but the time has come to ask deep questions as to whether a strategy that creates vacuums and a quagmire of devastation and despair in the elusive quest for democracy and civil liberties has been self-defeating. While fundamental responsibility must be taken for our failure and the near certainty of what will befall those brave men and women who will be tagged traitors, my despair is countered only by acknowledging that the United Kingdom was an important but junior partner to the coalition in practical terms. However, this does not excuse government from responding to key questions.

Although it came as no surprise, why did HMG, with all their historical experience of Afghanistan, fail to anticipate the rapid collapse of government and the Taliban takeover? What was our post-withdrawal plan for Afghanistan in the run-up to a western withdrawal? What are our plans now, in the light of the Taliban takeover, and how will the Government, with the discredited western alliance, seek to counter all this?

The United States has a moral obligation to Afghanistan but has now lost credibility, if not all. The writing was on the wall from the start. There was never going to be a political and military solution with the imposing of systems through the prism of western capitals to the exclusion of culture and history. That was our undoing. Reflecting on my forays into Afghanistan over earlier years, meeting all manner of people and learning of missed intelligence, leaves me questioning imposed, corrupt, centralised democratic governance of Afghanistan as untenable—although, to an extent, that is exactly how it may end up.

In defeat, we should not look exclusively at how this debacle is detrimental to our interests but rather consider the detriment to the people of Afghanistan. The potential lot of women defies comprehension. Western media and we in Parliament should not be fooled by the dichotomy between the Taliban's political wing, with its suave messaging, and events on the ground. I listened with dismay to a heartrending message to world leaders about what is to befall women: "Shame on you"; "We have no hope"; "Afghanistan is being taken back 200 years". It ended with the most telling statement: "We are disgusted." Omens are not good, with a Talib leader confirming worst fears.

On the broader front, our involvement in Afghanistan has sullied our reputation and laid open a comparative advantage to the very relationships that government policy castigates—for which read Russia, China and Iran. Has the time come when a far-ranging strategy towards all three should be considered? They will undermine proposals no matter how pragmatic, use vetoes and play their respective hands with an eye to the main chance.

All the negative effects of the narco trade should not be underestimated but given that the Taliban is a creature of Pakistan's ISI, what of covert support by the ISI? I am hearing that it has firmly informed the Taliban that they will need to deliver on the moderate approach they claim to have adopted if they wish to stay in power. Complexities, such as the inability of the Saud family in government to rein in wayward family members with their abundant wealth and extremist religious ideology, remain a concern. I anticipate proxy organisations supporting terrorism into the western world, with al-Qaeda setting up Afghanistan as the base for operations, with far-ranging tentacles in a wholesale network of terror stretching across the Sahel into Mozambique. My prognosis is bleak and, I trust, wide of the mark. We cannot and must not abandon Afghanistan.

5.10 pm

Baroness Goudie (Lab) [V]: My Lords, I pay tribute to all those in the military services, diplomatic services and others who have been working together in Afghanistan over the last 20 years. I also pay tribute to those who have lost their lives and their families, and those I have been privileged to work with.

For two decades, the Afghan women have been leading efforts to build a brighter future for Afghanistan. Encouraged by us, America, Canada and other countries, they have been working hand in hand to make their country a better, freer and safer place. Now the Taliban has taken control of the country again, these women activists are at risk and are at the top of the Taliban hit list because they stood with us and we encouraged them.

When the Taliban came to power 20 years ago women bore the heaviest price. This time will be no different. It is already the same. As we know, women and their children were unable to go the checkpoints today without somebody going with them. It was terrible. They were turned back. We are hearing that the homes of Afghan women are being invaded and their organisations being looted. They fear for their lives and for their families. We are seeing girls being told not to go to school any more. Women are being told that they cannot leave their homes, except with a guardian.

As I said earlier, women activists are at the top of the Taliban kill list. They are targets for kidnapping, torture and assassination. However, the United Kingdom and US Governments have not prioritised getting this group of heroines to safety. By leaving them behind, we are abandoning our allies and abandoning future generations who are in the greatest of need. It is not too late. We can still keep the promise to our partners.

What is the United Kingdom's ARAP scheme to accommodate women peacebuilders whom the United Kingdom and other countries supported for their

[BARONESS GOUDIE]

work with women who we trained through peace and security? How will the proposed visa scheme for the most vulnerable Afghans ensure—not over the next five years but over the next five days—that it includes women and girls who supported the UK's work on peace and security throughout and on the borders of Afghanistan? We know that we work closely with America bringing women from Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan to try to do peacebuilding between the three countries. What is the scheme for these women?

How will the UK ensure that all the work on girls' education will not be reversed and how will we keep the momentum going? How will we ensure that women and girls get safely to the airport, as I have asked previously? Further, what are our proposals for the long-term peace talks and will we ensure that in all peace talks there are 50% women at the table, regardless of the Taliban's asks? We have to have women at the peace table. I agree with my noble friend Lord Hain that, in the words of Jonathan Powell—who I have a great deal of respect for and have worked with many times—we have to talk to the enemy. If we do not talk to the Taliban, we will not know what is happening. I will be pleased to hear from the Minister how we are going to deal with these things immediately. There is not time, as the Home Secretary thought this morning on Sky.

5.14 pm

Lord Vaizey of Didcot (Con): My Lords, I pay tribute to the 457 British military personnel who lost their lives in Afghanistan and the many thousands who have been injured. I do not think their sacrifice was in vain. I think they kept us safe for 20 years and they changed the lives of millions of people in Afghanistan. I also pay tribute to the hard-working staff of the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office in Afghanistan and, indeed, in Whitehall, working tirelessly to make something out of the crisis that has been created.

This has been a very wide-ranging debate. It has covered the blame game, as it were, and it has looked widely at Britain's place in the world, given what has happened. I would like to contribute thoughts on that, but not in this debate, given the number of expert speakers who have participated and the short time allowed. Instead, I wish to concentrate on one narrow issue, which is the role of arts and culture in Afghanistan. Britain played a leading role in regenerating Afghan culture, and we must now support those who helped us undertake that work.

My attention has been brought to numerous important cases, and I hope that Ministers will focus on those as well as on the other urgent cases; for example, the extraordinary Afghan teacher, Aziz Royesh, who set up the Marefat High School, which educates 4,000 children, half of whom are girls. I gather he has now made it to the airport and hopes to be airlifted with his family either to the US or the UK. He is a prime example of an individual in Afghanistan who stepped up to the plate, with the opportunities provided by the defeat of the Taliban, to make a real difference, but who is now a target.

I think also of the staff of the National Museum of Afghanistan. The lives of eight curators and their families are in danger. They are considered to have

collaborated with the West, when all they were doing was restoring their own country's cultural heritage. I think of the British Council contractors—there are 25 individuals—and their families, who worked to create links between British and Afghan schools and who taught English. They are now ostracised; they are accused of being spies and of promoting Christianity.

There is now a campaign to look after artists and musicians. Afghanistan had national orchestras, and orchestras made up solely of women, whose lives are, again, under threat. There is the work of Blue Shield International, ably supported by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. It is important to recognise that every department in Whitehall will be working in some shape or form to help with this current crisis, but I pay tribute to the civil servants at DCMS in particular who are working to try to preserve the cultural artefacts and heritage of Afghanistan.

Shining a light on these few examples brings to life the fact that there was, to a certain extent, what one might recognise as a normal life in Afghanistan after we had defeated the Taliban, which was coming back. That is what the tragedy is about, but it is also about the here and now—these personal stories—and trying as best we can to secure the safety of the Afghan civilians who helped us so much in our work.

5.17 pm

Lord Bhatia (Non-Affl) [V]: My Lords, I agree with most of the speeches made by various Peers. All that has been said, and the questions asked, are valid. We are facing a disaster that is unfolding in front of us.

My thoughts go back to decisions taken by various Governments after 9/11. Germany allowed thousands to come from Syria. Prime Minister Thatcher allowed east African nationals to come to the UK and others to migrate from the West Indies and the subcontinent. Canada has traditionally allowed many thousands who are in trouble to enter Canada and to stay there. Many who were in trouble went to Canada, and today we face a similar need to allow Afghans who have helped us in Afghanistan over 20 years to come to the UK.

In the minds of many UK citizens is that all these people are Muslims. Unspoken, but deeply felt, is that these immigrants are Muslims, and they will bring terrorism to the UK. I submit that Islam is a peaceful religion and killing is forbidden. Tolerance is in the ethics of Islam, as is living peacefully with others and giving help when help is needed. There are many Muslims who sit on the Benches of your Lordships' House, including on the Front Benches.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country surrounded by Muslim countries such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Iran and Pakistan, as well as China, which has a large Muslim community. Afghanistan is one of the most geopolitical countries in the world. There are real fears that the new regime may trigger violence between Shias and Sunnis. We in the UK must face reality and work with the new regime to ensure that human rights are recognised and respected, and violence is avoided. To this end, the UK must bring together many nations through the UN.

5.20 pm

Lord Singh of Wimbledon (CB) [V]: My Lords, history records that the Indian subcontinent was repeatedly invaded by Afghan armies bent on looting and carrying off captives for the slave and sex trade. There was very little resistance until the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the 1800s. He fought the marauding Afghans, freeing captives. After prolonged fighting, Sikh forces entered Kabul itself but, instead of acting vindictively, true to Sikh teachings, they showed respect for the Afghans and their places of worship. Trade and mutual respect led to the settlement of thousands of Sikhs in Afghanistan. Today, the latest figures show that there are fewer than 300 Hindus and Sikhs left, mostly huddled together in a Sikh gurdwara. Their lives are in great danger and I make an urgent plea to our Government to help them leave.

The West went into Afghanistan to fight extremism, but eliminating religious extremism requires us to pinpoint its causes, namely the bigotry of belief that the one God of us all has favourites and that my belief is better than your inferior belief. My reference to Sikh rule in Afghanistan was to emphasise the antidote to bigotry: that no one religion has a monopoly of truth and that showing respect for the ways of others wins hearts and minds and is the best way of fighting extremism. Today, although it hurts, we must extend this to the new rulers in Afghanistan, to move them to tolerance and respect for others.

Finally, a word on refugees and the negative connotations attached to them. The reality is that, in the main, refugees bring added value to their host country. This morning, I saw a clip about a young Afghan doctor who came to this country as a teenage refugee. Another, with family trapped in Afghanistan, who works with my daughter in a south London practice, came as an infant and is now a leading voice in primary care and a frequent contributor to the *BMJ* and other publications. Admission of 20,000 refugees over the years is vague. Will the noble Lord the Minister support my plea that this should be changed to 10,000 in the next 12 months to help those who are now in real and imminent danger of their lives?

5.23 pm

Baroness Jolly (LD): My Lords, I echo the gratitude of noble Lords for the efforts and sacrifices of our Armed Forces over many years in Afghanistan.

Yesterday we watched, with alarm, the return of the Taliban, taking front of stage in Kabul, projecting a new, softer public image. There is no doubt that many fear the Taliban. They have seen them at work and are alarmed for their personal safety, and particularly that of women and girls.

I want to talk about the NATO occupation. Clearly there has been a catastrophic failure in the performance of the regular Afghan army during the last month. The reasons, as opposed to journalists' speculation, are likely to be many and complex. However, we cannot ignore the fact that, for at least the last decade or more, the US and UK have been heavily involved in equipping and training that army. In any inquiry into this debacle—and there must be an inquiry, which should be independent and not internal—it is important

that the implications of the Afghan army's collapse to a much smaller and less well-equipped force are properly analysed and that changes are implemented.

I also raise a concern that either the rapid collapse was recognised as a significant risk factor in the contingency planning for the timely and safe evacuation of people we are responsible for, or the possibility of rapid collapse was not recognised, which would indicate a serious failure of intelligence. As my noble friend Lord Dholakia said, our cultures are different; we do not always think in the same way. We continually underestimate the ability of our foes and overestimate our own and that of our allies.

One real concern for the future is immediate: the impact of this military and political defeat on the refugee crisis which will arise in the next few months and years—not just directly from Afghanistan and neighbouring countries but from the effect on other regimes emboldened by the failure of western democracies' collective foreign policy, for example in sub-Saharan Africa. Our current government strategy of creating a hostile environment to refugees to discourage crossings of the English Channel is as effective as a Woodentop army battle plan. The Dover Strait is not the place to conduct an exercise in "comfort persuasion", when refugees have already demonstrated their determination to escape brutal regimes by clinging to the undercarriages of aircraft about to get airborne or walking across a continent—or two—to get to Calais.

Working with our allies, we need to create a safe conduit so that refugees are welcome and their asylum applications rapidly assessed, and they are then supported properly into our communities. This will not be cheap either in monetary terms or, I suspect, in electoral popularity—but it is the price to be paid for political and military failure.

5.27 pm

Baroness Noakes (Con): My Lords, the events in Afghanistan are truly shocking, but there is nothing that your Lordships' House can say today which can change what has happened. There has been much hand wringing over the plight of Afghans left in a country governed by people who do not share western values—but Afghanistan is not unique in that. We cannot even be sure that what the Taliban stand for is unpopular among most Afghans. Research from only a few years ago found extraordinarily high levels of support for aspects of the Taliban's policies which liberal democracies abhor—including those which impact women. It is an uncomfortable truth that not everywhere in the world wants to be a rights-based democracy.

The Government are right to focus on those who will not be safe staying in Afghanistan and deserve praise for their resettlement scheme, which I believe is in addition to the relocation scheme for those who have worked for us. Unlike many noble Lords who have spoken, I believe that limits are necessary and I completely support the Government in that. The welcome of the British people for refugees will be sincere, but it will not be infinite.

There are over 30 million people in Afghanistan, so we must be highly selective and risk-based. Only those genuinely at risk in Afghanistan should be included in

[BARONESS NOAKES]

the scheme, but of equal importance is a risk to the security of this country. Those who might present a threat to the UK must be kept out. It is dangerous in the extreme to abandon the need for proof of identity, as some noble Lords have urged. The Government must also step up efforts to deter illegal entry, which is already at intolerable levels. The Nationality and Borders Bill, which your Lordships will consider fairly soon, must become law as rapidly as possible.

I am not sure that this recall of Parliament was needed. We have recorded our shared horror and shame, and a few political points have been scored—but did we really need to come back from recess to do that? There are many issues which are far more important to the British people than that.

5.30 pm

Lord Triesman (Lab) [V]: My Lords, it is hard to know where to start on an Armageddon of an event, but it is barely surprising. The repeated warnings of a power vacuum, the endless opportunities for Taliban military, social and political position-building, the final optics of the US midnight flit from Bagram and the Afghani leaders jumping ship or switching sides all propelled us to an inevitable outcome. It is pointless for our Foreign Secretary to affect surprise. The speed at which Afghani forces changed sides was amply demonstrated for us in 2001, yet we apparently learned nothing. Afghani leaders failed Afghanistan, but the sudden withdrawal of logistic, contractor and life support were huge failures for the United States and allied forces, although fully understood by all Afghanis, including, of course, the Taliban. Apparently, we have not learned the lessons of Oman about the 30 years that are needed to build an effective army. We have been short-sighted, dim and forgetful.

What now? First, we must fully honour our obligations to those we employed, used and befriended, and we must honour those in the heroic allied forces who died, to whom I too pay my deep respects. Secondly, it is imperative for all allies multilaterally to try to shape events by setting out the conditions for future aid and any possible changes in political status. The Taliban may reject all this, but the alternative is to leave behind a vacuum to be filled by the Chinese, an untrustworthy Pakistan, Russia and Iran, complex as it will be for any of them. Of course, the conditions must cover human rights, not least for women and girls, but given that we are talking about the Taliban and AQ, there is little ground for optimism. Indeed, we will now have paltry intelligence on them on the ground or on any terrorists' intentions or those of other malign actors. Thousands of AQ terror prisoners have already been released. It would be mad to underestimate probable radicalisation and recruitment everywhere, not just by state actors. As noble Lords have pointed out, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee showed that 95% of UK street heroin comes from Afghanistan via the Taliban, the Northern Alliance, Russian intelligence and Mafia organisations, mainly co-ordinated in Brighton Beach, New York.

The bodywork of global Britain is badly dented, as is the reputation of our closest ally. The US and everywhere else worldwide will understand this, so,

please, no more hyperbole about British strategy. We do not have one, and we never did, other than to give uncritical tactical aid to the United States. The integrated review is largely shredded. We need a rigorous appraisal starting with the understanding that not all wisdom resides with the Government of the day. We have been poor students across a number of Governments, not just this one. The Prime Minister today claims foresight. He actually lacked foresight, insight or even good sense. How mad to follow the lunacy of the Trump/Taliban deal surrendering a unilateral withdrawal date in exchange for nothing. How thin is the relationship with President Biden, and how true is the judgment of the noble Lord, Lord Howard, that it may be a defining moment of his presidency. Our defining moment will come only when we grasp that we have pretended omniscience when the reality has been threadbare understanding.

5.33 pm

Lord Berkeley of Knighton (CB) [V]: My Lords, this has been a sobering debate indeed, and speeches have rightly been unanimous in their support for our Armed Forces, diplomats, BBC journalists and the women and girls now at risk. I too endorse the pleas for support for religious freedom in Afghanistan. However, those predicaments could pale before the enormity of a geopolitical shift that would see the Taliban aligning with China and Russia, as my noble friend Lord Alton, my noble and gallant friend Lord Stirrup, the noble Lord, Lord Hannan and the noble Baroness, Lady Altmann, warned.

Writing in the *Times* yesterday, the noble Lord, Lord Hague, warned us not to turn our backs on future interventions, and he cited our work in Kosovo, but what we have learned once again today is the danger of interfering in other cultures, particularly tribal ones, without a carefully considered exit plan. As Vietnam and Iraq foretold, vacuums are inevitably filled by warlords or groups whose aims are at odds with those of the free world and frequently lead to an even worse situation than that which we sought to improve.

We cannot and should not conflate the cultures of other societies with our own, but, from the Crusades on, I fear that that is what we have consistently done, as the noble Lord, Lord Dobbs, colourfully described. Like him, I found Ben Wallace's interview moving in its honesty. I dared to hope when I saw the Taliban press conference that there might be some hope that the Taliban of 2021 is not that of 2001, but we have heard anecdotes and warnings from noble Lords better informed than me that we should be very sceptical about this. Nevertheless, jaw, jaw must, for the time being, be preferable to war, war, even if it is ultimately a doomed exercise—after all, we do business with other countries that invoke sharia law, however foreign it may be to our values.

I therefore have specific questions for the Minister. First, will the Government keep the House informed after the Recess on how the Taliban are behaving on the ground, how they are treating women and children, whether freedom of religious belief is being allowed, and if they are, as the noble Lord, Lord Vaizey, mentioned, pursuing artists and musicians? Secondly, was there no intelligence to suggest the inadvisability of a withdrawal while the Taliban were seasonally in

the cities, as opposed to the winter when they tend to withdraw? If so, was this intelligence ignored? Thirdly, is it true that a country-wide disgust at the corrupt failings of the Afghan judicial system, despite the rise of women judges, has meant that there is more support for a return to sharia and the Taliban than otherwise might be the case?

I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Lamont, that we need to come better to terms with our current place in the world to inform our future interventions which, I pray, will be few and far between.

5.37 pm

Lord Godson (Con): I too wish to associate myself with the remarks made in tribute to our forces, civil servants, public servants and aid workers. Many have paid tribute already today, but it is important that the total unanimity and solidarity of this House is heard at this time. It has been a hugely important debate and a privilege to listen to. It may be, as several speakers including the noble Lord, Lord Howard, have said, an inflection point for the future world order and particularly for our alliances going forward.

The role of the United States has been central to this and the Biden Administration have been rightly criticised, I think unanimously—as least, I have not heard any speaker defend their decision here today. It is a uniquely personal decision of this President, who has a long-held view about the necessity of withdrawal from Afghanistan. It has been a shameful and a graceless decision expressed in graceless ways, as has been noted, with insufficient tribute to the Afghan security forces who gave their lives and to allied and NATO countries whose forces—notably our own—also gave their lives.

However, the Biden Administration are not the totality of America. Through much of my political life, having been born an American citizen, I have noted many pessimistic predictions for the US after previous debacles, although perhaps none quite as serious as this, which rolls in many of the features of past debacles into one fell swoop.

I remember the pessimism about the US retreat in Vietnam in 1975 and the debacle of the hostage crisis in Iran in 1979-1981 when the Khomeini regime humiliated the Administration of Jimmy Carter. I was working in America when the bombing of the US marine barracks in Beirut and the subsequent humiliating withdrawal of US marines and other forces took place. I can well remember all those things. But because the Biden Administration are not the totality of the United States and its polity, America has an enormous resilience and ability to bounce back, to reappraise, regroup and regroup.

It is interesting that, despite the implication that the Biden Administration withdrew so rapidly from Afghanistan for political reasons, the latest polling numbers from Politico pollsters already indicate a 20% drop in US public support for withdrawal from Afghanistan, so humiliating and abject are the terms. Even though the public do not object to the withdrawal per se, the way in which it has been conducted is so obviously unsatisfactory and degrading as to prompt that drop. That is not the totality of United States public opinion and it may be that, in the coming days and months, anti-interventionist groups such as the

Quincy coalition will see a further erosion of their support as well, as the American public look at what has been done in their name and whether it is in the United States' national interest.

As far as wider alliances and partnerships are concerned, I make one final point: there needs to be a serious reappraisal of our relationship with Pakistan. Several speakers have already alluded to this. It is a complex country, with complex motives and a complex system of government. I ask the Minister whether he would be willing, since the UK Government are setting up an office of net assessment, to consider having a net assessment of our relations with Pakistan and more broadly in the region and to have an overall look, now we are at this inflection point, at what can be done here and now.

5.41 pm

Lord Garnier (Con) [V]: My Lords, I draw some comfort from what my noble friend Lord Godson has just said but, as other noble Lords have already said, there is no benefit in complaining today about the actions of the United States in pulling out of Afghanistan or the casuistry deployed to justify its decision, despite the obvious and terrible consequences of it doing so for the people of Afghanistan, especially the young women and girls, who face a dark future of repression and sexual abuse. But, if the 20-year sacrifice of our troops and the appalling events in Afghanistan of the last few days tell us anything—and I wish it were otherwise—they highlight some of the unwelcome but indisputable truths about our own country, our international standing, our Government and their leadership which cannot be ignored.

My noble friend Lord Hannan of Kingsclere said that we live in a time of poor options. He is right but, in a time of crisis, the United Kingdom looks to its Prime Minister for an informed opinion, resolution, clear policy, readiness for the unexpected and a sense of purpose. As a member of the United Nations permanent five and the second most important member of NATO, with a once-recognised reputation for probity, steadfastness and national honour, and as a country with the ability to project power diplomatically and militarily, we expect to have some, if not an overriding, influence on the President of the United States and other allied leaders. But it seems we have none.

Mr Biden did not ask for our views because he did not consider them important, nor us a serious interlocutor. Judging from the G7 conference in Cornwall, we are not taken seriously by the leaders of France and Germany either. It does not take much imagination to work out what Presidents Xi and Putin think. The new Government of Iran and the Afghan Taliban now know enough about us to plan their futures untroubled by concerns about what we can or might do. We have arrived at a situation where neither our closest friends nor our foes pay attention to what we say or do and our ambassador and Armed Forces are desperately trying to save people from butchery in Kabul.

When Margaret Thatcher chided President Reagan for invading Grenada, he apologised; when, at the start of the Iraq crisis in August 1990, she told President Bush Sr that

“this is no time to go wobbly”,

[LORD GARNIER]

he remained resolute. She possessed moral, military and political strength. In the face of the greatest and most obvious foreign policy question that this Government have had to face outside Europe, we find something quite else. I am afraid that we find a failure of leadership, absence from the bridge, delayed decision-making through inadequate intelligence and poor assessment of information and a lack of preparedness. Government is difficult but it is not a branch of the entertainment business. I am not as subtle as my noble friend Lord Howard of Lympne; there is a vacuum at the head of government. It is not only nature that abhors a vacuum.

5.44 pm

Lord Sikka (Lab) [V]: My Lords, the tragedy of Afghanistan has been exacerbated by power games played by major nations. In the 1970s, western powers were not willing to accept a communist Government in Afghanistan and sought to undermine them by arming and funding the insurgents. The Soviet Union responded by invading in 1979 to prop up its client state. The US and western state powers responded by creating and funding al-Qaeda, yet still there is no reflection on the funding of terrorist organisations to further political objectives—the UK Government have continued to suppress documents relating to their support for al-Qaeda.

The Taliban itself came out of the counter-revolutionary insurgency organised by the CIA in the 1970s and 1980s. The objective was to overthrow the country's Government. Eventually, the Soviet Union was driven out, but rogue elements gained power. As the noble Lord, Lord Suri, reminded us, during the 1996–2001 brutal rule of the Taliban regime, minorities, including Hindus and Sikhs, were forced to wear yellow badges reminiscent of the yellow Star of David that Jews were forced to wear in Nazi Germany—yet there was only muted protest from western powers.

The 9/11 tragedy changed that. The US-led war on terrorism somehow became an expensive occupation. The attempts to build Afghanistan in the image of the West have failed, just as they have failed in Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere. The result has been chaos and the deaths of thousands of innocent people. We need a fundamental rethink of foreign policies.

I have three questions for the Minister. Can he assure the House that an independent inquiry will examine the folly of the UK's foreign policies? Secondly, why did the Government not designate the Afghanistani Taliban as a terrorist group under the Terrorism Act 2000? Thirdly, what are the Government's preconditions for any recognition of the Taliban Government in Afghanistan?

5.47 pm

Lord Cromwell (CB) [V]: My Lords, the many preceding eloquent and erudite speeches reflect perhaps a measure of agreement on a number of points. We went to Afghanistan with the US and others largely to strike, successfully, at terrorist capability based there. However, an Afghan proverb says that community is not created by force. The mission creep that followed resulted in a far wider—laudable, but much longer-term—set of objectives being taken on.

In the subsequent two decades, many have died and been injured and I join in the condolences and tributes expressed by other speakers today. It is for others to decide whether the sacrifice was worth it but, as other noble Lords have said, it disrupted terrorist activity and kept our country safer from attack. It also gave a generation of young people, particularly women, in Afghanistan a tantalising taste of another way of living.

Withdrawal at some point was inevitable and we really had no choice other than to leave once the US pulled out. It is the regrettable manner of the allies' withdrawal and the chilling messages that it sends that so many have spoken about today. Many points have been made and moving examples cited and I will not repeat them here.

However, I will ask the following questions and I would be grateful for the Minister's replies. First, on UK relationships, where does this leave the UK-US relationship and what role, if any, does the UK now have in seeking to work with China and Russia on Afghanistan and its neighbours, given the pretty poor relationships that we have with both at present? I cannot help but wonder what their embassies are saying to the Taliban today.

Secondly, on the Taliban, to what extent do the Government actually believe that Taliban 2 is really different from Taliban 1? Will internal pressures with those who have lived and fought alongside them create splinter groups and renewed conflict? We heard a great deal from the Front Bench early in the debate today that the Taliban must do this or not do that, but what ability do we have to enforce any of that? Can we now expect a boom in the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan across central Asia to Europe and beyond?

Many today have spoken about those people coming to the UK. Over the last day or so, the Taliban appear to have been allowing an exodus, but on what grounds does the Minister believe that this will continue for the several months—nay, years—envisaged in recent announcements? Would it not be wise to have a plan for when the Taliban start to restrict or even select—we need to ponder this point—those whom they allow to come to the UK?

I close with a chilling phrase from Sun Tzu's *Art of War*:

“When ... your ardor”

is

“damped, your strength exhausted and your treasure spent, other chieftains will spring up to take advantage of your extremity. Then no person, however wise, will be able to avert the consequences that must ensue.”

We need a plan to avert the consequences that, in different ways, now threaten both us and the vulnerable people of Afghanistan.

5.50 pm

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con) [V]: My Lords, the terrible debacle in Afghanistan confirms—indeed, the debates in both Houses of Parliament today confirm—that the world has reached the end of an era. Among other things, it cannot rely any longer just on American security guarantees. That also has major security implications for the increasingly dangerous situation in Taiwan.

That offers a clear lesson that western security pundits have been rather slow to grasp. President Biden himself says that America

“cannot afford to remain tethered to policies created in response to the world as it was 20 years ago.”

Nor can we. As the noble Lord, Lord Berkeley, observed a few moments ago, my noble friend Lord Hague said that we must not give up on all responsible overseas intervention. That is right, but are we playing the intervention role in the right way and in the right country context?

In truth, our long intervention in Afghanistan was of the classic, old-fashioned military occupation kind of the sort that worked in past centuries—although only with great difficulty in Afghanistan—but in this revolutionary digital-power age influence, persuasion and peacemaking, or peace imposing, work in completely different ways. The lessons are old, but the digital age has magnified those factors a thousandfold. The battlefield now lies almost entirely in the realm of continuous psychological warfare, the undermining and deconstructing of hostile visions, new, ever-deeper and much better intelligence links, and persistent demoralisation and division of the rival camp.

Sheer size of weaponry and defence spend are no longer enough, if they ever were. General de Gaulle once wrote:

“Nothing lasts unless it is incessantly renewed.”

Security and stability within nations now rests on completely changed foundations, as does the prevention or swift suppression of armed and violent conflict. Those foundations depend on the domination of communications, the domination of cyber superiority and constant news and information superiority—plus, of course, carefully targeted funds in the right areas—as much as, or more than, having troops on the ground.

In Afghanistan, account has now to be taken of the entirely altered distribution of world power: hard, soft, smart and sharp—whatever you will. Of course we want America as a partner, but America is no longer the automatic leader in this field. I realise that all this is difficult for the traditional policy and planning mindset to grasp, but to root out medieval dictatorships and the lawless terror methods that they use, we must now—and this is difficult—work with, at least on this front, China, Russia and Asian and African powers generally, and the new networks that govern and are reshaping the modern world, including the worldwide Commonwealth network.

5.54 pm

Lord Birt (CB) [V]: My Lords, the United States came to our rescue in two world wars. Without its intervention in the second, Europe—including the UK—might now be under either a Soviet or a Nazi yoke. We should be for ever grateful for that. But the US was a reluctant interventionist. Separated from most of the world by two mighty oceans, there is a deep isolationist tendency in US society. Never forget that it was Japan’s ill-judged attack on Pearl Harbor that forced America into World War II and al-Qaeda’s monstrous attack on 9/11 that took the US into Afghanistan.

We and our allies are broadly united in our foreign policy goals: we want to protect our security; we want a prosperous and accessible global economy; we want—and the pandemic explains why—the benefits of a healthy world; we do not want to see suffering, abject poverty or starvation; and we want a world which promotes democratic values, equality, freedom of expression and the rule of law.

Yet we appear a long way off achieving this better world. So many countries, on every continent, are in the grip of totalitarianism or despots of various shades. The chaotic exodus from Afghanistan, following decades of investment and sacrifice, marks a serious reverse in the most unstable region in the world—the 4,000-kilometre arc that spans from Syria to Pakistan. As then Senator Joe Biden so presciently said in 2003,

“the alternative to nation building is chaos, a chaos that churns out bloodthirsty warlords, drug traffickers and terrorists”.

Europe and the United States share a bedrock of common values. Europe’s GDP, including the UK’s, matches that of the US. However, as America’s unilateral withdrawal so painfully illuminates, Europe is no match for America in terms of military capacity. It is all too clear that the nations of Europe cannot alone protect and promote all their global goals; the risk of dependency on, or even of abandonment by, the US is too great. It is time for all of Europe to stand back, to review and to reflect.

5.57 pm

Lord Davies of Stamford (Lab) [V]: My Lords, I do not think I shall ever forget the extraordinary pictures we saw the other day of human desperation at Kabul airport. That is one of those dramatic pictures you never forget. The most extraordinary thing about the whole incident was that I got the impression the British Government were extremely surprised by events and had not prepared for them at all. I would have thought that anyone responsible for Afghanistan would have considered the possibility of a Taliban offensive and decided to plan to meet it. However, as far as I could see, no contingency plans were in operation at all, which is most extraordinary. I would have hoped there was a plan years ago focused on that contingency and that it would have been exercised from time to time to keep people alert.

I fear that the British Government became extraordinarily complacent and, as people do when they become complacent, began to believe their own propaganda—that Afghanistan was doing well and was well on the way to becoming a stable democracy, as we all hoped it would. There was no evidence for that at all. On the contrary, it was quite clear that the real curses of Afghanistan—corruption, war and the exploitation of women—are as constant there as they have been in previous generations, and are very difficult to eradicate.

Nevertheless, in the circumstances we must ask ourselves what we will do. In this excellent debate, I think there has been consensus that our primary, absolute obligation is to try to save the lives of those who worked with or for us in Afghanistan, whether as interpreters, aid workers or whatever. They must be

[LORD DAVIES OF STAMFORD]

extracted from Afghanistan as soon as possible and generously treated when we have got them back. Nothing is as important as that.

At the same time, as has already been suggested, we need to have a thorough look at the way in which we make our foreign policy—whom we consult, which countries we are prepared to co-operate with and which we are not—and to develop a new doctrine approach to foreign policy co-ordination. For many years we did not really need foreign policy co-ordination, because we had a special relationship with the United States; we spoke to them and that was good enough. Then we joined the European Union and again we were within a structure in so far as the European Union was concerned, developing co-ordinated foreign policies, which was a good idea in principle.

With both those things now gone, I am afraid that relations with the Americans will take a lot of repairing, so we need to think again about how we handle these things, who we rely on as allies and who we want to speak to about various problems and share the issues of the day with. This should be done systematically, and hopefully quite quickly, because we do not have very much time.

This has been an extremely valuable debate. A lot of people have asked pertinent and sensible questions, and they deserve a considered response. It would not be reasonable to expect the Government to give such a response in a brief wind-up speech, but I hope they will be generous in writing letters to Members who have taken part and will set out the Government's position on the various points that have been made. That would greatly add to the utility of the whole exercise of Parliament—

Baroness Evans of Bowes Park (Con): I am afraid I have to interrupt the noble Lord. We thank him for his contribution and perhaps we can move to the next speaker, the noble Lord, Lord Gadhia.

6.01 pm

Lord Gadhia (Non-Affl): My Lords, as we seek to make sense of the unfolding tragedy in Afghanistan, the waning political courage and leadership from successive US Administrations is now clear. This has been compounded by strategic miscalculations and amplified by tactical errors, especially in implementing the withdrawal of US troops. Our experience during the pandemic has demonstrated that policy driven by dates, not data, is highly susceptible to unravelling. It has created a self-fulfilling prophecy for the Taliban to seize control.

The UK is, regrettably, a policy-taker rather than a policy-maker in this situation, but we cannot absolve ourselves of responsibility and we must face the immediate consequences. There are three obvious priorities. The first and most pressing issue is rescue. For someone who comes from a community of refugees, the Ugandan Asians, who were forced to flee their country overnight, the scenes from Afghanistan are especially harrowing. They spark uncomfortable flashbacks to events 49 years ago this month that led to the evacuation of nearly 60,000 people, about half of whom took refuge in

this country. In 1972, the then Prime Minister, Edward Heath, fulfilled the UK's moral and legal responsibility. We must do so again. I agree with the Foreign Secretary that we are a big-hearted nation, and the bespoke asylum scheme is welcome. We must keep the criteria under review but, above all, execute it with urgency and do so without artificial caps, securing safe passage for evacuation. Every minute and every hour is crucial in saving lives.

The second consequence is dealing with Taliban 2.0, which is now far better funded and organised and increasingly media-savvy. The ink is barely dry on the UK's integrated review, which promised deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific. This is the first big test of global Britain, especially of our ability to negotiate shifting power balances.

That leads neatly to the third concern—namely, elevated instability across the region. An estimated 30,000 mercenaries have been trained. No longer required to capture Kabul, they are ready to be deployed elsewhere. Countries such as India and Bangladesh are bracing themselves. Even Pakistan is not immune from the forces of destabilisation and an influx of refugees.

South Asia's population of nearly 2 billion people has enough challenges in managing the pandemic, accelerating vaccination and spurring economic recovery. The last thing the region needs is the turmoil associated with regime change and the intensified export of terror. We clearly need to work with allies and partners to pre-empt this serious risk.

In conclusion, the message that I hope goes out from Parliament today is not one of despondency or impotence but of resolve, offering hope to those most affected. We may have lost this battle in Afghanistan, but the pursuit of freedom and democracy is a constant war for hearts and minds that we have not abandoned and never will.

6.04 pm

Lord Darroch of Kew (CB) [V]: My Lords, the outcome in Afghanistan is a tragedy for the Afghan people and a humiliation for the West. The immediate priorities are clear. We must honour our obligation to those Afghans who worked for us, a category that we should define widely. I agree with noble Lords who have called for a more generous resettlement scheme, delivered over months rather than years and with the appropriate infrastructure in place here in the UK. I also support the call from the noble Lord, Lord Kerr, for reconsideration of the asylum applications of the 3,000 Afghan refugees already in the UK.

On diplomacy, it is right to co-ordinate with allies, to be cautious about recognising the new leadership in Kabul, and to judge the Taliban by their deeds, not their words. I pay tribute to the courage of those British military and officials, including some former Foreign Office friends and colleagues, who remain on the ground in Kabul organising the evacuation, and of course to the contribution and sacrifice of British forces throughout the Afghan deployment.

I have one broader point about why we are where we are. During my three and a half years as National Security Adviser I travelled to Afghanistan around a dozen times. I saw for myself the extraordinary

transformational work of the British military, but I also could not miss the reports about low morale and high desertion rates in the Afghan army and its total reliance on foreign support. I would hear that without our presence it could not maintain the equipment we were giving it, get basic supplies to its bases or get its wounded to hospitals. It is now being reported, all too believably, that in the run-up to this collapse most Afghan soldiers had not been paid for months and that when the fighting started there was a failure to get ammunition to those on the front line. No wonder the collapse was so swift. It was also clear to me that corruption was deep and endemic in the Afghan system. The Afghan people did not want to return to Taliban rule, but nor did they appear to have much attachment to the Government they lived under.

We went to Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 to destroy al-Qaeda. That mission evolved into something approximating to nation building. We had the best of motives, but we were working in an environment where the ordinary Afghan soldier felt little loyalty to his commanders, where the army could not function without hour-by-hour support from international contractors, and where the Government were seen by the people as the corrupt and ineffective creature of foreign powers. In short, we set ourselves a Herculean task that was going to take decades.

Meanwhile, the Taliban strategy was one of waiting us out, expecting our resolve to break, as it did. To compound this failure, the abject Trump exit deal of last year effectively gave the Taliban 18 months to plan their final assault. There was never any chance that the Afghan army would hold out after we abandoned it. Our baling out prematurely meant that it was bound to end like this. It was predictable and predicted, not least by the Lords International Relations and Defence Committee. I believe that this outcome would also have been predicted and anticipated in Washington, although not the speed with which the collapse unfolded, which makes its withdrawal look all the more cynical.

We are left with some big lessons to be learned, perhaps, as some have suggested, through a formal independent inquiry that includes lessons about mission creep, intelligence failures, the danger of wishful thinking and ignoring the facts that do not fit the preferred narrative of progress, and, most of all, the need for strategic patience.

6.09 pm

Baroness Northover (LD) [V]: My Lords, over 120 of your Lordships have spoken today. We have had passionate and well-informed speeches, including from those who have had long engagement with Afghanistan, whether in the forces, intelligence, diplomacy, development, or in other ways. There is overwhelming agreement that what has happened is a catastrophe, made all the worse because it was avoidable. Here are some terms used today: ignominious, embarrassing, betrayal, humiliation, failure, shame, defeat, disaster, dark days for western civilisation, human desperation.

Above all, this is a catastrophe for the people of Afghanistan. After all the investment in Afghan young people in particular—girls as well as boys—who should have been the very future of Afghanistan, their prospects,

and possibly their lives, have been destroyed in a few short weeks. Women and girls have had their lives cast into the shadows. We already hear that women are no longer seen at work, in education, or in the street. They are being subjected to appalling attacks, whatever the Taliban leaders may be saying. As the noble Baroness, Lady D'Souza, pointed out, significantly the Taliban agreed to no provision for women's rights in the so-called peace talks that President Trump initiated.

I too pay tribute to our own troops. Families and friends of the 457 young men and women who lost their lives in Afghanistan will be wondering what their terrible loss was all for. Who could not be moved by what Tom Tugendhat said in the Commons today? What distress and bitterness may be felt by those whose lives have been so damaged by physical and mental injuries? My noble friend Lady Brinton and others were right to highlight this.

Some 20 years ago, after the atrocity of 9/11, there was international agreement to go into Afghanistan. Yes, that was to tackle al-Qaeda, but it was also wider, as the noble Lord, Lord Ricketts, said. It was engagement with a failed state that was a breeding ground for terrorism. I recall my much-lamented friend Lord Garden, with his military and strategic background, saying that engagement would need to be for at least 30 years, if not much more. Long engagement was required so that this was not a failed state, with the terrorism risk deriving from that. My noble friend Lord Newby points out that the US engagement in Europe after the Second World War still holds today.

Of course, we know that the West, and in particular President Bush, was deflected by the conflict in Iraq—as my noble friend Lord Bruce pointed out—and we also know that corruption undermined development. However, we have long known that development is immensely challenging, but also worth it—as we have seen in many parts of Africa, or even more recently across the Balkans—pulling people out of poverty but also reducing conflict.

This catastrophic decision, and the lack of planning to which my noble friend Lord Strasburger pointed, has resulted in the collapse of the fragile Government and the potential reversal of all that was achieved over those 20 years. We have cast Afghanistan back to being a failed state, as the noble Baroness, Lady Manningham-Buller, with her deep experience, has warned.

Where was global Britain in all of this? What influence did we have or seek with our allies the Americans, to whom we have pivoted because of leaving the EU? I note what the noble and learned Lord, Lord Garnier, and the noble Lord, Lord Howard, said. What was it that the integrated review said? Apparently, we can

“shape the international order of the future”.

Is this an example? It also said that

“What Global Britain means in practice is best defined by actions rather than words.”

Indeed. It also stated that

“The UK will remain the leading European Ally in NATO.”

The PM failed to answer Theresa May in the Commons this morning when she asked how early he spoke to the Secretary-General of NATO. Can the Minister clarify?

[BARONESS NORTHOVER]

If he chooses not to do so, we should ask him to answer all unanswered questions in writing. He is a Minister we respect, and we expect that of him.

The integrated review states that the United States “will remain the UK’s most important strategic ally and partner.” What did we say to the Americans about this clearly catastrophic course of action—or did we not? Do we conclude, as my noble friend Lord Wallace said, that there is no special place for the United Kingdom in the US’s thinking? The Government actually seem to share that view, arguing that there was nothing they could do and that they were powerless.

This decision flowed from an ill-informed, populist president: President Trump. The decision was made in February 2020, as the noble Baroness, Lady D’Souza, mentioned, and, as with his other agreements, he sought settlements with those whom we hardly viewed as allies, securing little or nothing in return. How did we work through NATO to help shield President Biden from the domestic political effects of breaking with this policy or to muster support for a different approach? Can the Minister tell us what we advised and when we advised it? We know that we did not feel that our military leaders wanted to go down this route.

My noble friend Lord Purvis noted that the Government claimed that the United Kingdom was the lead country in NATO for Kabul’s defence and that the capital was regarded as vital to protect diplomatic presence there. Did the UK advise NATO to allow the capital to fall? Now, there are no embassies there except China, Pakistan and Russia, and, as the noble Baroness, Lady Ramsay, pointed out, you can see who has benefited here. The noble Baroness, Lady Verma, pointed out that China is likely to supply the Taliban with funds, reducing even further our leverage.

As my noble friend Lord Campbell said, we have lost influence, trust and reputation. As others have said, including my noble friend Lady Smith of Newnham, we do indeed need an independent inquiry into our engagement in Afghanistan but surely, above all, into the manner of our abandoning the country. We are now rightly talking about how we assist people out of the country, as a number of noble Lords, including my noble friends Lord Dholakia, Lady Jolly, Lord Jones, Lord Roberts, Lord Taylor and Lady Walmsley, have urged and explored. What a terrible indictment that is of what we now see as the future path of Afghanistan: that we have to help out of the country its best and brightest.

Noble Lords have been acerbic about the plan which, as my noble friend Lady Ludford pointed out, was announced only last night: that we should take 20,000 refugees but over five years, waiting for most of them to be at major risk first, it seems. As the most reverend Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury said, this needs to be a moral issue, not a numbers issue. Safety from the Taliban should not be for just foreign nationals or the lucky few who made it in time to Kabul airport. How exactly, with an internet blackout, are people to fill out applications to leave? Do the Government recognise that anyone seeking to leave now puts themselves at risk because of Taliban control of all areas with their checkpoints?

There are so many who need to be helped: Afghan interpreters, to whom the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, and others referred; journalists, especially women journalists and those working for the BBC; parliamentarians, especially women parliamentarians. I think particularly here of those with whom I have engaged and praised for their returning to their country of birth, and feel so worried now for them, as is my noble friend Lady Hussein-Ece. There are those who worked with the British Council; women judges, as mentioned by the noble and learned Lords, Lord Judge and Lord Goldsmith; those involved in teaching girls—this was an area that the Prime Minister said was a priority for him. There are Chevening scholars and others. It was astonishing that, at first, the Government were asking Chevening scholars to wait. What on earth were they thinking of? There are vulnerable UN workers and aid workers—so much of the economy was associated with reconstruction; so many will be at risk now.

The PM mentioned this morning that multitudes have appealed to him for help. What did he expect? But he wants most to stay in the region, so exactly what does this mean? As my noble friend Lady Sheehan said, we cannot have a “wait and see” policy here. We are on the UN Security Council; can the Minister fill us in on our role now with the UN? The Secretary-General says that UN workers are staying in country, yet we also hear that they feel unsafe and are leaving. Exactly how will the UK Government use their seat to ensure that the international community is working collectively to hold the Taliban to account on human rights and potentially to establish a safe passage to allow Afghans to escape? What engagement will be taken forward with the Taliban, as advocated by my noble friend Lord Alderdice, with his vast experience?

Others have noted the savage cuts in aid to Afghanistan, and the partial restoration here. Will the Minister guarantee that this does not come from another part of the aid budget? I note that, even so, it does not restore the aid budget to what it was before.

This has been a very important and sobering debate on a catastrophe of our own making. It shows up very clearly that the United Kingdom will need to assess again its place in the world and how it best secures its own as well as others’ peace and prosperity. That clearly requires working together and countering the populism and nationalism that underpinned this decision. There will be many in Afghanistan, and many others around the world and in our own country, who will right now feel far less safe than they did, and that is a terrible reflection on where we find ourselves today.

6.22 pm

Lord Coaker (Lab): My Lords, this is a truly historic debate and there have been many powerful contributions. We all understand the enormity of the situation and hope that that is reflected in our words. When we read the contributions that have been made, I think it will show that this House has risen to the occasion at a time of great historical significance for our nation and, indeed, the world.

The situation in Afghanistan is truly shocking. What we are witnessing on our TV screens and in our newspapers is a heart-breaking human catastrophe.

Women and girls are terrified, there are reports of rape and people are so frightened that they are clinging to planes even as they take off, with tragic consequences, as the noble Lord, Lord Campbell, referred to. There are countless scenes of refugees—women, the elderly and children—fleeing to anywhere they can. There are reports already of terrorist groups re-emerging. That is the context for our debate and discussion today.

So how did we get here? How is that, just six weeks ago, the Prime Minister said:

“I do not think that the Taliban are capable of victory by military means, a point I have made several times”—[Official Report, *Commons*, 8/7/21; col. 1112.]?

As the noble Baroness, Lady Amos, said, how is it possible to have underestimated the speed of the Taliban's response? Can the Minister explain how there was such a miscalculation of the resilience of the Afghan Government and their armed forces following the arbitrary date of the US withdrawal? As the noble Baroness, Lady Taylor, asked, how will we investigate what happened?

Above all, it was the catastrophic decision of the US President to leave Afghanistan on an arbitrary date without a clear peace plan or follow-up mission that ultimately led to this crisis, as so many noble Lords have noted, including the noble Lords, Lord Dannatt, Lord Newby, Lord Hammond, Lord Blencathra and Lord Forsyth, and the noble Baroness, Lady Fall. As my noble friend Lady Smith asked back in July, and again today, were any representations made to the US President about this withdrawal and was it raised with any other NATO Heads of State? The noble Baroness, Lady Warsi asked, quite rightly, what attempts did we make to change US policy?

Before I move on, let me agree with the noble Lords, Lord Hunt and Lord Bruce, and the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, and many others that President Biden should not have blamed the Afghans. He should not have criticised the Afghans who fought bravely, suffering many casualties and deaths, until the Americans withdrew. Their sacrifice and suffering should be recognised, and are, by this House and many others.

Of course, questions about how we got here and what caused it do not deal with the immediate, appalling humanitarian crisis that we face. What do we do now for the people of Afghanistan, trapped in horror? Can the Minister comment on how we accelerate as a priority the process by which UK nationals, support staff and the Afghans who served us get out? Those people supported us in our hour of need. We must now support them in their hour of need. It is our moral duty.

We still hear reports of people—students, interpreters and others—struggling to get out. The noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, referred earlier to the problems that interpreters are having. Numerous noble Lords have quite rightly raised various issues in respect of the refugee programme. For example, the noble Lord, Lord Roberts, and my noble friends Lord Dubs and Lord Blunkett raised the need to change the immigration legislation so as not to penalise Afghan refugees arriving in the UK by boat. The same point was made by the noble Lord, Lord Kerr. How does the Minister respond to that, and will he make representations about it to the Home Office?

Important contributions were made also by my noble friends Lord Adonis and Lady Bakewell, the noble Lord, Lord Hunt, and the noble Baronesses, Lady Walmsley, Lady Pidding and Lady Brinton, highlighting the need for a proper resettlement programme and for greater numbers to be included. Can the Minister outline how the new resettlement programme will work? How on earth was the figure of 20,000 agreed on and reached? It now turns out, from what we heard on the radio this morning, that it is not 20,000 but 5,000 in the first year. Where is the Home Secretary's urgency with respect to that resettlement programme? I think that many of us would say that it is simply not enough. My noble friend Lady Royall pointed to the plight of girls in rural areas and the need for the scheme to be open to them. Specific cases and groups were raised by others, including the noble and learned Lords, Lord Judge and Lord Goldsmith, and the noble Lord, Lord Macdonald, who pointed to the plight of women judges. We must not leave any of them stranded. Will we do that, or will we act? The Minister will need to tell us.

What is happening at the airport? Can the Minister explain the arrangements there? Will the agreement between the US and the Taliban allow us to continue until all our humanitarian responsibilities are met? Are we operating there to a US timetable, or will we be able to ensure, working with our allies the Americans, that our people will be able to get out even if all the Americans have left? Can the Minister confirm that reports this morning that a British evacuation flight left almost empty because of difficulties in reaching the airport are correct? Is it true that shots have been fired at the airport as well?

There is a need for us to consult neighbouring countries. What discussions have taken place with the UN and countries in the region about a broader refugee programme which will deal with those people seeking to go into countries that border Afghanistan as they flee the terror that they face? Many Members of your Lordships' House have highlighted the plight of women and girls.

The noble Lord, Lord Hammond, is a former Defence Secretary, and the noble Lord, Lord Dannatt, and many other noble Lords have served in the Armed Forces. I pay tribute to all our Armed Forces personnel, past and present. I hope your Lordships' House noted the comments of my noble friend Lord Touhig when he spoke about veterans, as a former Veterans Minister. Many of the veterans are here, not only in this House but in the other place, along with members of staff who have contributed to the defence of our country. We should salute all of them, and they should know that we salute all of them and that we do not take their service for granted. We respect and honour them, not only for their place in this House but for what they did in ensuring that we can, in this House, have the freedom of speech denied to so many others.

They served their country and did their duty, but, sadly, 457 lost their lives, while others suffered injury or trauma. They fought for democracy, freedom and human rights; they went to Afghanistan in response to the terror attack in 2001. Will the Minister join me in saying that those soldiers—those Armed Forces

[LORD COAKER]

personnel—kept this country safe and kept the streets of this country safe by the actions that they took in Afghanistan? We salute them for that, and the British people should understand that. Going to Afghanistan was not a waste: they protected their country, their communities and their families by doing that and, again, we salute them for doing that. Will the Minister join me in recognising that?

Will the Minister say, just for explanation purposes, what the Defence Secretary meant when he said that the military could still deal with a growing terror threat, either through cyber or a kinetic strike? We all welcome the authenticity and integrity of the current Secretary of State for Defence in the way that he showed, without embarrassment, his desire to ensure that he would do all he could to get as many people as possible out of Afghanistan. That was a sign not of weakness but of strength. I salute him as well for that. As my noble friend Lady Ramsay pointed out, we need to talk to Pakistan, Russia and China. Will the Minister say what the Government's policy is with respect to talking to the Taliban? Is it to talk directly to them or is it to talk through third parties? We need to understand what the Minister feels about that.

As has been mentioned by many noble Lords, the current crisis has huge implications for the global Britain policy that was outlined recently in the various defence reviews and reports, and hailed as a new, fresh start for a confident Britain. I, like the noble Lord, Lord Gadhia, think that this is not a time for our country to be despondent. Yes, this is a difficult time; yes, this is, frankly, a crisis of historic proportions; but we have passed through those before. We are a leading member of the United Nations on the Security Council; we are a permanent member of that. We are a member of NATO. Now is not the time for us to lose our confidence. We need to learn from what happened and retain the confidence to stand up for the human rights and democracy across the world that so many of us are looking to provide.

Let me finish by saying that it is confidence that we need: not an arrogance, not a belief that we can tell others how to live their lives, and not a way of intruding where we are not wanted. But this country has a proud record, one that we should remember. We have always stood up for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. We have had terrible problems in the past in ensuring that we do that. Now is not the time to lose that confidence: now is the time for us, with our allies, to say that we will look to learn from what has happened, but we will never retreat from what we have stood for, and we should be proud that we have a country that does that.

6.34 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) (Con): My Lords, I stand before noble Lords at this hour after an extensive and expert debate in your Lordships' House. Having been the recipient of questions and challenges in this House over a number of years, I can say that the quality of the debate has not disappointed anyone. Indeed, the insights that we have gained from

various parts of the House, from military experts to diplomats and other experts, have been very welcome. I have always taken the approach that the insights provided by your Lordships' House, both within the Chamber and outside it, provide insight to me in the formulation of policy.

From the outset, I welcome the noble Lord, Lord Coaker—this is the first time that I have been across the Dispatch Box from him—and I associate myself totally with his remarks about our military. In doing so, as I look around this Chamber, to my left and my right—and as I am handed one final note—I look to the doorkeepers. As a Member of your Lordships' House over the last 10 years, I say that they have done a sterling job not only in keeping us safe but in their past service as part of our military, which has kept us safe for so many years. I thank them for all that they have done and continue to do.

I have listened very carefully to various debates, and, recalling what the noble Baroness, Lady Northover, said, I shall seek to answer all questions. Of course, in this ever-evolving situation, I will seek to respond accordingly to questions that I am not able to cover in the time that I have.

The other thing that I will put on record, as I have on other issues, is that I shall certainly seek to update your Lordships' House frequently on this particular issue and, if required, update noble Lords directly through a note prior to the House returning. Of course, as we return from the Summer Recess, I shall convene a meeting of interested Peers to update them and all noble Lords on the situation in Afghanistan. My noble friend Lady Warsi asked about information. A note is being circulated about key emails and contact numbers that went out to colleagues in the other place—I am ensuring that it is also circulated to Members of your Lordships' House.

We all know why the Prime Minister called us here today: it is because of the deep concern that we all share for the people of Afghanistan. I have a particular insight in this because I am responsible for the policy for Afghanistan and south Asia and have been Minister for Human Rights over the last couple of years. I put on record that, while I have had this responsibility, I have worked quite directly with many of the people that noble Lords have talked about. The noble Baroness, Lady Royall, talked about those fantastic young ladies and girls of the orchestra, and my noble friend Lord Vaizey talked about the cultural instincts. I remember welcoming these young girls to the UK for the first time—perhaps about 18 months ago—in hosting a reception at Lancaster House and watching them play beautiful music.

My assessment, under a Taliban regime, is a dire one. I make an assessment, and I have always quoted that. Indeed, when the International Relations and Defence Committee—the foreign affairs committee of your Lordships' House—questioned me, I pinpointed that the ideological base of the organisation that is the Taliban is the thing that we should challenge. I speak as a Muslim. We have had debates and discussions on Islam and its role, and I say to the Taliban directly from the outset: the chapters of the Holy Koran, with the exception of one, start with the words:

“In the name of God, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful”.

Are you going to be merciful and beneficent towards your citizens? That is how we should hold the Taliban to account.

I assure noble Lords that, in all my engagements and all the discussions that we will have with international partners, that will be at the heart and soul of the engagement that we need to have with this organisation that seeks to represent a faith that I follow—although its interpretation is so far from the nobility of any faith or sense of humanity. We should be unified in our response to this particular group.

But let us not forget that it is also disparate. Just because we now have polished spokesmen articulating that rights for women matter, that does not mean that local commanders will follow suit. We need to follow a very fluid situation very carefully. I take on board the points that were made by the noble Lords, Lord Green and Lord Berkeley, and my noble friends Lord Dobbs and Lord Lamont. My noble friends Lord Dobbs and Lord Lilley talked about the importance of learning lessons. I assure noble Lords that, whether it is in a formal way or as we evolve our policy, we do exactly that.

As the noble Lord, Lord Dholakia, and the noble Baroness, Lady Amos, reminded us, we must, in our interventions, understand the culture and the nature of the engagement. Yes, it is important that we extol democratic values. Often, when I talk about human rights, I do so not with a pointed finger but by saying that our own journey on democracy and human rights was a difficult and challenging one—yes, and on rights for women as well. We need to apply that learning in a way that is understood by others, while also respecting cultures and communities across the world.

The nature of the US decision to withdraw has been a focus. Of course, the US has a right to take its own decisions on how troops are deployed. Let me assure the noble Baroness, Lady Northover, my noble friend Lord Naseby, the noble Lord, Lord Dubs, and my noble friend Lord Godson, who also reflected on attitudes within the US, that of course we discussed the US decision to withdraw with our NATO allies. Yes, my right honourable friend the Prime Minister has been engaging extensively with NATO allies, including the Secretary-General of NATO; he spoke to him most recently, on the 15th. But meetings have been taking place. What was understood, as my right honourable friend the Defence Secretary articulated, was the reasoning that with the extensive nature of the US engagement there was no viable military option without the US. We need to be realistic about that.

I share the point that the noble Lord, Lord Coaker, and my noble friend Lord Hunt made about the cost to the people of Afghanistan. We have on record only the numbers that are articulated, but there are many more. We should not put down a whole population over the failings of the groups that seek to represent a faith or, indeed, to represent the country today.

I assure the noble Lords, Lord Cromwell and Lord Birt, that we have been engaging quite directly with allies. We have been talking to the US and to European partners. Only a month or so ago I was in Tashkent at a conference on Afghanistan, where I met counterparts from India and Pakistan, including Prime Minister

Imran Khan, those from Uzbekistan and a number of other partners. At that point, President Ghani and Foreign Minister Atmar were very much in place, and those discussions were but four weeks ago.

However, I agree that this debate, as the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, said right at the opening, comes at a critical and uncertain time. I express my absolute and sincere thanks for all the contributions that have been made and which reflect noble Lords' exceptional expertise and heartfelt concern. I note my thanks to all noble Lords, but I listened particularly carefully, as I am sure other noble Lords did, to the contributions of the noble Lord, Lord Dannatt, and the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, and the expertise that they provided, as well as to the insights from the diplomatic expertise of the noble Lords, Lord Ricketts, Lord Jay and Lord Kerr, among others.

I will seek to address some specific issues that have arisen, but let me say from the outset that I share all noble Lords' concerns that the Taliban's military offensive is unacceptable, as is the takeover of Kabul. The Taliban pledged in the Doha agreement to engage in talks in good faith, yet the actions we have witnessed on the ground reflect a total and utter betrayal of that promise. It is also important to recognise that this takeover of power has followed a coercive and violent military campaign. It has not been a peaceful transition, a point made by the noble Lord, Lord Newby. We also maintain our stance that it is not yet too late for the Taliban to pursue their aims through a political process. A point was raised about engaging with the Taliban directly. We do not do so on a bilateral basis, but we have of course been engaged through the political process taking place in Doha and working with the likes of Qatar in this respect. However, the Taliban must cease all hostilities and military action, ensure the protection of civilians and facilitate the safe and orderly departure of foreign nationals and those Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan.

In this context, I join in the tributes being paid to our ambassador on the ground, who I am in touch with. He is playing a sterling role, along with our military, in ensuring that the security of our staff is fully respected and prioritised, and that we do all we can to deliver on our obligations to get British nationals, as well as those who have helped us, out as fast as we can.

The noble Lord, Lord Dannatt, talked about having a small-scale public inquiry into our purpose in deploying support for this exercise. We are learning the lessons from Afghanistan, and it has been a continuous process. That is why, after the conclusion of Operation Herrick in 2014, the Army conducted a thorough internal review. Lessons were also incorporated into the integrated review published by the Government earlier this year.

I say to my noble friend Lord Gadhia and the noble Baroness, Lady Northover, that the integrated review is an important document. The noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, mentioned the Indo-Pacific tilt, which is an important part of the integrated review. Events in Afghanistan have underlined the enduring importance of those objectives and the profound challenges that we face in pursuing them.

[LORD AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON]

As the security situation deteriorates, our ambassador, Sir Laurie Bristow, and a small team remain in Kabul. I cannot give any specific date on when those operations may cease, but their security is of paramount importance. Of course, we are cognisant of the announcement that the US has made of its operations ceasing at the end of this month. I would add that, irrespective of what noble Lords have said on the US decision, the US remains an important ally and we should recognise that the current process of evacuation from Kabul could not take place without the assistance of the brave men of the US military as well as our own.

I assure the noble Lord, Lord Blunkett, that we do have a security Minister. My right honourable friend Damian Hinds was appointed earlier this month. We are working across government to ensure that we have a co-ordinated presence on the ground including through the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence and the FCDO. Our officials remain in Kabul to continue our important work supporting the drawdown of British nationals and those we have a moral obligation to help. It is important we do not lose sight of our moral compass in that respect. We will be working through the Afghan relocation and assistance programme. These changes in no way reduce our commitment to active diplomacy in the region.

My right honourable friend the Defence Secretary has provided additional troops to Afghanistan and we have deployed additional diplomats who arrived yesterday, once security could be confirmed, to help the processing capacity. I understand there are concerning reports coming out of Afghanistan of British nationals in distress. I have also been in touch with Members of your Lordships' House as well as Members in the other place about specific Afghan nationals. I assure noble Lords of my good offices in ensuring that we do all we can to resolve some of these very acute and challenging cases. I am not going to name names for obvious reasons, and I know your Lordships will respect the fact that we need to keep the confidence of and protect the individuals concerned.

Turning to ARAP, many noble Lords including the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, raised the issue of interpreters. We recognise that we owe a debt of gratitude to them and other locally employed staff who risked their lives to work alongside our forces. While we have resettled hundreds of former Afghan staff and their families, I can assure noble Lords that this is an enduring commitment. This programme has now been expanded and accelerated to ensure that Afghans who are not directly employed but none the less provided vital support to the UK's mission in Afghanistan can be considered as special cases.

I am fully aware of the cases raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Hussein-Ece, and others. I say to the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Newnham, that we are expediting processes in terms of visa applications on the ground as I speak. We are also looking at many cases of Afghans who have worked with the British Council and we remain focused on relocating those most at risk, but there is no time limit.

The noble Baroness, Lady Royall, talked of girls and women. Many other noble Lords mentioned this, and I assure noble Lords that they are being prioritised

within the ARAP scheme. The noble Lord, Lord Kerr, among others, talked about expanding the scheme. I have noted the suggestions that have been made on different categories, including the issue raised by the noble and learned Lords, Lord Judge and Lord Goldsmith, of judges. I will take note specifically of this, but again, in the interests of security and safety of individuals, I shall not go into the issue of categories directly.

The noble Lords, Lord Adonis, Lord Taylor and Lord Dholakia, and the noble Baronesses, Lady Brinton and Lady Smith, and others, referred to NGOs. I have noted what we are doing in this area. We are looking at resettlement first for women, girls, children and those most in need. The scheme will be kept under review.

The noble Lords, Lord Adonis, Lord Kerr and Lord Taylor, and the noble Baronesses, Lady Brinton and Lady Bakewell, asked about the numbers. The number we have announced in terms of the new scheme is in addition to the 5,000 we expect to relocate to the UK under the Afghan relocation programme. The noble Lord, Lord Coaker, among others, asked why the figure of 20,000 was chosen. It was based on the delivery of the Syrian resettlement scheme and the experience the Home Office has of running this sort of programme. The figure of 5,000 for this year has also been chosen based on the delivery of the Syrian resettlement scheme, but we will keep all the numbers under review.

We promised to do everything we could. The issue of the Chevening scholars was raised. Noble Lords will have seen me dashing in and out. We were progressing this during the day. Therefore, in a very challenging debate, I am delighted to confirm that today our ambassador is in touch directly with the scholars and we are in the process of arranging their travel to the United Kingdom. I am pleased to be able to share that with your Lordships' House. My noble friend Lady Evans raised that issue right at the start of the debate, and noble Lords can see how fluid the situation is; we have been progressing this during the debate.

Turning to human rights, I am also the Human Rights Minister. Issues around women and minorities are close to my heart. The most reverend Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury mentioned minorities and my community, the Ahmadis, in Afghanistan. Christians, Hindus and Sikhs were raised by my noble friend Lady Verma, among others. All of them are among our primary concerns in our dealings. I pay tribute to the work of noble Lords in your Lordships' House, including the noble Baronesses, Lady Smith, Lady Royall and Lady D'Souza, and my noble friends Lady Hodgson and Lady Anelay, who have done sterling work on women's rights. I will continue to work very closely with them on this important issue in Afghanistan. The Government maintain in the strongest terms their stance that the Taliban must protect and uphold human rights, including those of women, girls and minorities—and, as I said earlier, I noted the comments made about other groups.

The noble Lord, Lord Sikka, asked about our assessment of the Taliban. It is simple: if the Taliban continue to abuse human rights, they cannot in any circumstances expect to enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people or the support of the international

community. If the Taliban wish to play an international political role, which they must for the security and stability of Afghanistan, they must respect fundamental human rights. They must bring justice to those within their own ranks. Clearly, that is not happening, as we have witnessed on the streets across Afghanistan. The Taliban must prove that they respect the rights of the Afghan people by actions, not empty words. There is a Hadith—a saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad—which I put to the Taliban. “Your actions are judged by your intentions.” So what are their intentions? They must demonstrate them by their actions.

Turning to humanitarian aid, several noble Lords, including the noble Lords, Lord Boateng, Lord Jay, Lord Purvis and Lord McConnell, and the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, among others, raised prioritisation and support for people within Afghanistan. I assure them that that they have been high up my priority list, which is why the Government have prioritised aid. The noble Baronesses, Lady Northover and Lady Smith, raised this issue, as did the noble Lord, Lord Bruce. We are doubling the amount of overseas aid we had previously committed to Afghanistan. This will with immediate effect take funding for this year to £286 million. On its disbursement, my own view is very clear. I assure noble Lords that none of it will be going to the Government or the Administration, if I can call it that—I should not refer to it as a Government—of the Taliban. We will be looking at international NGOs and the UN system to play their part. Organisations such as UNICEF are retaining their networks on the ground and have been given an assurance by the Taliban that they will be protected. However, the Taliban must recognise their duty to prevent the crisis getting worse.

I am very conscious of time and I have not been able to cover many points. My noble friend Lord Sheikh and the noble Baroness, Lady Sheehan, talked about Afghanistan, Islam and the rights and obligations of the Taliban, and I totally share their perspectives. It is true that the international community needs to ensure that we hold the Taliban to their promise.

Many other noble Lords, including the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, raised the issue of security, as did my noble friend Lady Altmann. Work is being done with international partners. In recent days my right honourable friends the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary have spoken to the UN Secretary-General, the NATO Secretary-General, the United States, Canada, Germany, France, Pakistan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and USAID. We also recognise the important role of regional partners, including those highlighted by the noble Lord, Lord Bilimoria, and my noble friend Lady Verma. I have already mentioned India, and I am directly engaging with Pakistan and other near neighbours.

In closing my remarks, I assure noble Lords that, on the points that I have not been able to cover, we will work through different parts of our strategy in the coming hours and days. I assure my noble friend Lord Cormack that we are working on the UN Security Council resolution, and I take on board the suggestion made by the noble Baroness, Lady Amos, who speaks

with great insight on the UN system about the specific focus on women and girls. I take that on board as the UN Minister.

My right honourable friend the Prime Minister has announced that he will convene a special meeting of the G7 leaders to discuss the situation and we are seeking also to establish a contact group of international partners on Afghanistan. We are also planning an event with the high-level meeting of the UN General Assembly next month, to focus minds to raise further funds for particular issues. I will also participate directly at the Human Rights Council special session on Afghanistan next week; whether it is virtual or in person is still being determined but I will deliver the UK statement and contribution.

I apologise to noble Lords whose specific questions I have not been able to cover, but I assure them that I will write to them. As my noble friend Lady Evans said earlier—I noted very specifically the contributions and statements on this made by my noble friend Lord Howard, among others—the primary purpose of us being in Afghanistan was to ensure that it was not used as a base for international terrorism. Indeed, there have been no successful international terrorist attacks on the West mounted from Afghanistan since that time, but we cannot be complacent. It has not happened because there was a military presence, and we need to be real to the threat. That is why it is important we work with key international partners through the UN.

Afghanistan may now be in the control of the Taliban but, while the Taliban may not have changed, what has changed in those 20 years—as my noble friend Lady Pidding pointed out—is that Afghanistan itself has an incredible and phenomenal body of people within civil society: there are phenomenal women activists in all parts of society, working for NGOs; there is a free press, which has been targeted; there are women journalists, who have been targeted; and there is an education system where there are more girls. The Taliban say it will continue with those commitments; let us see how it delivers on them. I assure noble Lords that we will continue to work tirelessly with international partners to protect the gains that we have made.

My noble friends Lord Sheikh and Lord Marlesford, the noble Baroness, Lady Sheehan, and the noble Lords, Lord Bhatia and Lord Singh of Wimbledon, talked about the ideological base that I started with. In my concluding remarks, I make some specific points just to share with noble Lords my intent. If the Taliban says that it believes in the role of women, it must stand up for that: it must stand up for the rights of women that are provided under Islam—the rights of inheritance and the right to work. I often say to those who challenge me on Islam that, even going back to the time of the Prophet, who is followed by billions of Muslims around the world, it was he who was employed by his wife and it was she who proposed to him. So let us go back to that and give women rights.

I say to the Taliban: “If you believe in that philosophy and ideology you articulate, reflect that. Let us go back to the time of the Medina charter that protected the rights of minorities of every faith and those of no faith. If you are true to your word, we will make an

[LORD AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON]

assessment of what you are, whether you have changed and whether you are delivering on your promises.” My own assessment? It is not just that the jury is out on them; it is important to recognise that they in their philosophy and approach may be more polished, but their ideology is very much the same.

Many will say, “Engage directly now” and, as I have said, we are engaging from an international perspective with the political group and working with American colleagues—I met Ambassador Khalilzad when I was in Uzbekistan. It is very clear to me that in the

situation in Afghanistan, our short-term priority must be to ensure that we get the people out who need to come out but, equally, we will be building and strengthening international alliances and partnerships. In doing so, I shall be informed by your Lordships’ House in how we direct and inform our policy and how we continue to stand with the courageous people of Afghanistan.

Motion agreed.

House adjourned at 7 pm.