

Statement to Parliament: Oral

Statement: Northern Ireland Finances

With permission Mr Speaker I would like to make a statement about Northern Ireland finances.

Last week I laid a written statement in which I explained that the pressures on public services meant that it was imperative for the Government to take steps to provide clarity to enable planning in Northern Ireland for 2018/19.

With great reluctance and in spite of my strong preference for a new Executive to set a budget, I set out in this statement the resource and capital allocations which I considered to be the most balanced and appropriate settlement for Northern Ireland departments.

I did this following intensive engagement with Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) and consultation with all of the main Northern Ireland parties.

Mr Speaker, in the continued absence of an Executive, I have an obligation to take these and any other measures that are necessary to keep Northern Ireland functioning. But I will only take such measures where they are essential and limited in nature, and are part of a clear and consistent approach by the Government.

This approach is based on a number of principles...

First, we remain steadfast in our commitment to the Belfast Agreement. All that we do will be with the purpose of protecting and fulfilling the Agreement.

But, second, we will take those decisions which are necessary to provide good governance and political stability for Northern Ireland – consistent always with restoring the Executive and local decision-making at the earliest possible opportunity.

Third, we will continue to implement our obligations under the Agreement and its successors where possible – always working for the good of the community as a whole.

Finally, we will continue to work with all the Northern Ireland parties – and with the Irish Government as appropriate – to remove the barriers to restoring the Executive and a fully functioning Assembly.

The principles at the core of the Agreement, and the political institutions that it establishes, continue to have our full and unreserved support.

That means that ...

We will uphold the principle of consent, consistent with this Government's support for Northern Ireland's place within the Union and with maintaining the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom.

We believe in devolution, and the imperative for local decision making, by local politicians.

We support power-sharing on a cross-community basis, based on mutual respect and recognition.

We will continue to support and facilitate North/South co-operation – including as we leave the EU, while always preserving the economic integrity of the United Kingdom.

We will continue to work closely with the Irish Government in full accordance with the three stranded approach.

And we will continue to act fairly and govern in the interests of all parts of the community in Northern Ireland;

Mr Speaker, the necessary steps which I have taken and will continue to take are consistent with all of these commitments.

In addition to the steps I set out last week, there are several associated measures required to further secure public finances which I will be taking forward . . .

As well as cutting costs, securing efficiencies and beginning to take the steps to transform public services, it is right to look at how income can be increased to protect the public services on which the people of Northern Ireland depend. So, I will introduce legislation to set a regional rate – which will increase domestic rates by 3% above inflation. This will make an important contribution to sustainable finances in the long-run – with the additional funding addressing urgent pressures in health and education.

I also intend to act to extend the cost-capping of the current renewable heat incentive scheme in Northern Ireland, which the Assembly had put in place over a year ago.

It would not be acceptable to put finances at risk by simply allowing that cap to lapse. I therefore propose to extend it for a further year from 1 April – the minimal possible step to protect the public purse.

And I will also confirm the final spending totals for the Northern Ireland departments for the 2017-18 financial year in legislation to set Supplementary Estimates.

I also believe that the time is right to address the ongoing public concern about MLA pay in the absence of a functioning Assembly. I thank Trevor Reaney who was instructed by my predecessor to produce an independent view and recommended a 27.5% reduction to MLA pay. I will seek to introduce legislation to take a power to vary MLA pay. Further to that, I am minded to reduce pay in line with the Reaney Review recommendation, but I would welcome full and final representations from the NI parties before I make a final decision.

These measures – which I take reluctantly, but which are necessary

in the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly – will deliver the stability and the decisions to enable forward planning for the financial year ahead. But I am clear that they cannot provide the local input and fundamental decisions which are needed to secure a more sustainable future for Northern Ireland.

My powers as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland are limited. The scope of this House to pass legislation on the devolved issues which matter for Northern Ireland is limited. This rightly reflects the devolution settlement which is in place and to which this Government is committed. But it does mean that, in the continuing absence of an Executive, there are fundamental decisions in Northern Ireland which cannot be taken, scrutinised and implemented as they should be.

This has been the situation for 14 months already and, in the continued absence of an Executive, it would be irresponsible for us not to consider how we might provide for different arrangements until such time as the devolved institutions are back up and running. Alongside this I also continue to keep under review my statutory obligation to call an Assembly Election.

I would welcome the views and proposals of the Northern Ireland parties and others on how such arrangements – providing for local decision-making and scrutiny, on a cross-community basis – might be achieved in the continued absence of an Executive. And how any such arrangements might work alongside the other institutions of the Agreement.

Let me be clear that this in no way affects my commitment to the Belfast Agreement nor my commitment to continue to work to remove the barriers to the restoration of devolution.

As the 20th anniversary of the Belfast Agreement approaches, I am clearer than ever that Northern Ireland needs strong political leadership from a locally elected and accountable devolved Government. That remains my firm goal.

I commend this statement to the House.

Statement to Parliament: PM Commons statement on Salisbury incident: 12 March 2018

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the incident in Salisbury – and the steps we are taking to investigate what happened and to respond to this reckless and despicable act.

Last week my Rt Hon Friends, the Foreign and Home Secretaries, set out the details of events as they unfolded on Sunday the 4th of March.

I am sure the whole House will want to once again pay tribute to the bravery and professionalism of our emergency services and armed forces in responding to this incident, as well as the doctors and nurses who are now treating those affected.

Our thoughts, in particular, are with Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey who remains in a serious but stable condition. In responding to this incident, he exemplified the duty and courage that define our emergency services; and in which our whole nation takes the greatest pride.

Mr Speaker, I want to pay tribute to the fortitude and calmness with which people in Salisbury have responded to these events and to thank all those who have come forward to assist the police with their investigation.

This incident has, of course, caused considerable concern across the community. Following the discovery of traces of nerve agent in Zizzi's restaurant and The Mill pub, the Chief Medical Officer issued further precautionary advice. But as Public Health England have made clear, the risk to public health is low.

Mr Speaker, I share the impatience of this House and the country at large to bring those responsible to justice – and to take the full range of appropriate responses against those who would act against our country in this way.

But as a nation that believes in justice and the rule of law, it is essential that we proceed in the right way – led not by speculation but by the evidence.

That is why we have given the police the space and time to carry out their investigation properly.

Hundreds of officers have been working around the clock – together with experts from our armed forces – to sift and assess all the available evidence; to identify crime scenes and decontamination sites and to follow

every possible lead to find those responsible.

That investigation continues and we must allow the police to continue with their work.

Mr Speaker, this morning I chaired a meeting of the National Security Council in which we considered the information so far available. As is normal, the Council was updated on the assessment and intelligence picture, as well as the state of the investigation.

It is now clear that Mr Skripal and his daughter were poisoned with a military-grade nerve agent of a type developed by Russia.

This is part of a group of nerve agents known as 'Novichok'.

Based on the positive identification of this chemical agent by world-leading experts at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down; our knowledge that Russia has previously produced this agent and would still be capable of doing so; Russia's record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations; and our assessment that Russia views some defectors as legitimate targets for assassinations; the Government has concluded that it is highly likely that Russia was responsible for the act against Sergei and Yulia Skripal.

Mr Speaker, there are therefore only two plausible explanations for what happened in Salisbury on the 4th of March.

Either this was a direct act by the Russian State against our country.

Or the Russian government lost control of this potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others.

This afternoon my Rt Hon Friend the Foreign Secretary has summoned the Russian Ambassador to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and asked him to explain which of these two possibilities it is – and therefore to account for how this Russian-produced nerve agent could have been deployed in Salisbury against Mr Skripal and his daughter.

My Rt Hon Friend has stated to the Ambassador that the Russian Federation must immediately provide full and complete disclosure of the Novichok programme to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

And he has requested the Russian Government's response by the end of tomorrow.

Mr Speaker, this action has happened against a backdrop of a well-established pattern of Russian State aggression.

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea was the first time since the Second World War that one sovereign nation has forcibly taken territory from another in Europe.

Russia has fomented conflict in the Donbas, repeatedly violated the national

airspace of several European countries, and mounted a sustained campaign of cyber espionage and disruption. This has included meddling in elections, and hacking the Danish Ministry of Defence and the Bundestag, among many others.

During his recent State of the Union address, President Putin showed video graphics of missile launches, flight trajectories and explosions, including the modelling of attacks on the United States with a series of warheads impacting in Florida.

While the extra-judicial killing of terrorists and dissidents outside Russia were given legal sanction by the Russian Parliament in 2006.

And of course Russia used radiological substances in its barbaric assault on Mr Litvinenko. We saw promises to assist the investigation then, but they resulted in denial and obfuscation – and the stifling of due process and the rule of law. Mr Speaker, following Mr Litvinenko's death we expelled Russian diplomats, suspended security co-operation, broke off bilateral plans on visas, froze the assets of the suspects and put them on international extradition lists. And these measures remain in place.

Furthermore our commitment to collective defence and security through NATO remains as strong as ever in the face of Russian behaviour.

Indeed our armed forces have a leading role in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence with British troops leading a multinational battlegroup in Estonia.

We have led the way in securing tough sanctions against the Russian economy.

And we have at all stages worked closely with our allies and we will continue to do so.

We must now stand ready to take much more extensive measures.

Mr Speaker, on Wednesday we will consider in detail the response from the Russian State.

Should there be no credible response, we will conclude that this action amounts to an unlawful use of force by the Russian State against the United Kingdom.

And I will come back to this House and set out the full range of measures that we will take in response.

Mr Speaker, this attempted murder using a weapons-grade nerve agent in a British town was not just a crime against the Skripals.

It was an indiscriminate and reckless act against the United Kingdom, putting the lives of innocent civilians at risk.

And we will not tolerate such a brazen attempt to murder innocent civilians on our soil.

I commend this Statement to the House.

Consultation outcome: Animal welfare: banning the use of electronic training collars for cats and dogs

Updated: Added the summary of responses and government response.

We want to know what you think about our proposal to ban the use of electronic training collars for cats and dogs.

Electronic training collars (e-collars) are corrective behaviour devices which allow electronic shocks to be applied to pets by their owners.

To protect the welfare of cats and dogs, we wish to ban their use by introducing regulations under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

Press release: FCO Minister Field statement on UN Fact Finding Mission on Burma

This report by the UN Fact Finding Mission on human rights has reaffirmed the appalling human rights violations that so many in Burma have suffered and confirms that the Burmese military are primarily to blame for the widespread and systematic violence against the Rohingya.

These findings show the vital importance of an open and transparent investigation into these appalling events and I urge the Burmese authorities to reverse their decision not to cooperate with the Fact Finding Mission, and allow them immediate access so they can continue their work.

I call on the Burmese authorities to establish a credible and independent investigation into these horrifying accusations, and a judicial process to hold to account those responsible for abuses.

The UK is fully committed to help bring an end to this humanitarian crisis and I plan to update Parliament on the Government's approach at the earliest opportunity allowed.

News story: PM meeting with Prime Minister Muscat of Malta: 12 March 2018

This afternoon the Prime Minister held a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Muscat of Malta ahead of the Commonwealth Day Service at Westminster Abbey. The Prime Minister thanked Prime Minister Muscat for the progress made on the reform agenda during Malta's Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth. Both leaders looked forward to the upcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in April.

The leaders also discussed the ongoing Brexit negotiations, with Prime Minister Muscat welcoming the further detail provided in the Prime Minister's recent Mansion House speech. The Prime Minister reiterated that the UK is ambitious about the future relationship with the EU including on services. She also noted the importance of the UK and the EU reaching agreement on the terms of the implementation period at the March European Council.