

My speech on the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Bill, 10 March 2020

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I support my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and my other right hon. and hon. Friends, who have made a strong and cogent case based on national security. As they have argued, there are some absolutes in national security. There are occasions when a risk is such that whatever the commercial or other considerations might be, it is important for that to be put first.

However, I wish to add to their argument. I do not think the commercial and economic situation in the medium term is any different from the national security situation. Indeed, I argue in defence matters and these wider matters that our country cannot say it is secure if it does not have control of the crucial technologies it may need to defend itself and protect itself. Nor can we say that our country is secure—an island trading nation—if we are dependent on countries and suppliers in other parts of the world who may in some future disagreement or, heaven forbid, some conflict no longer be willing to supply us.

It is most important that we have control of that technology with our allies, and that we have the ability to make and to scale up manufacture, should the need arise, if the diplomatic situation around the world worsens. This is just such a situation. These are crucial technologies. These are technologies that people based in the United Kingdom who accept our system and have allegiance to our democracy are quite capable of developing and producing. They are already being produced by people in similar countries with similar purposes and systems who believe in democracy and the international WTO-policed world trading system and who are willing to trade with us in the meantime. I urge the Government—keen as they rightly are on a levelling-up agenda to spread prosperity more widely around the country and keen as they rightly are to get the most out of our new status as an independent country—to understand that our wider national security rests not just on the specific issues of intelligence and the flow of data but on our capability as a nation to control and exploit crucial technologies and our ability, with our strong and confirmed allies, to have that productive capability, come what may.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman rightly refers to our national security being dependent on our allies. Some of our best allies are old friends such as Australia and New Zealand. Surely it is deplorable that any move we make could damage that relationship.

John Redwood: I agree. I have supported my right hon. and hon. Friends and I have not wished to bore the House by repeating all their excellent arguments, but of course the fact that the United States of America, Canada, New Zealand

and Australia are all of one view does matter. I happen to think they are right, but even if they are wrong, sometimes we have to go along with wrong thoughts by our allies and friends—I know that only too well, trying to live in the Conservative party—in order to make things work. There has to be give and take, and I am sure that any other political party with an honest MP would agree that it has exactly the same issues. Before Labour Members get too conceited, I have to say that I have noticed even more extreme issues in the Labour party. It is important that there is give and take.

I happen to think our allies are right, but I want to stress the wider point that in this vision of a more prosperous Britain, we are going to have more skilled people. That must mean we have a bigger role to play in the technologies of today and tomorrow, and those are surely the crucially important digital and data communications technologies. I repeat my challenge to the Minister. We have heard from people who know about these things that this technology already exists among our allies and in safe countries today, so we have an opportunity to buy from them.

The Government and the commercial sector in the United Kingdom are about to commit enormous resource into putting 5G into our country. This is going to be a massive investment programme, and in this situation, money talks. I have no idea who will win the competitions. I do not have preferred vendors that I want to win the competitions, but I do know that I do not want high-risk vendors winning them. Surely this new Government, wanting to level up and wanting to strengthen technology and training, can use this commercial money and state money to better effect. Let us bring forth those providers now and get rid of those high-risk providers as soon as possible.