

Launching the Tech Zero Taskforce

It's great to be here – and I don't know about you, but I think there's a real spirit of optimism and energy in the air. Regardless of the decision we have to take today in relation to the final stage of opening up, you can just feel that energy and vibrancy returning.

And you see a place like this, in the heart of London, that has been renewed over the past 20 years – and tech has been at the heart of it. That really fills me with a sense of hope for the future, and I feel like whatever happens, we're through the worst of this terrible crisis.

It really is a pleasure to be here – and it's a pleasure to see how CogX has grown even in the past three or four years that I've been involved with you, going from strength to strength, like so much of the tech sector in this country.

Indeed, so much has changed since I spoke just last year here.

Back then, absolutely everything was virtual. I think we're still sort of feeling our way through the experience of being back in rooms with people. But the idea of having even 30 people in a room like this would have seemed extraordinary a year ago.

And yet here we are, working our way back to normality, step by step. We can go to the pub and out for dinner with friends; we can sit in a stadium, or attend events like this.

But it's really important to remember that all of this would not have been possible – that we simply would not be here today – without the power of human ingenuity.

Without bright minds – many of them in this country – who, when faced with a completely novel virus that was devastating health systems across the world, turned to science and tech to innovate their way out of this crisis.

Through genome sequencing, through mRNA and other groundbreaking vaccine technologies, these innovators turned COVID from something that brought life to a standstill, to something we can hopefully live with in the long-term.

Humans have of course long innovated their way out of adversity. Now it's time for tech to take on one of the greatest challenges that we face as a global society.

Of course, as you know, in 2019, the UK became the first major economy in the world to commit to bringing all greenhouse emissions to net zero by 2050.

It is one of the most ambitious targets in the world – and of course government alone cannot deliver on this. We need the smartest thinkers and most audacious entrepreneurs to help us get there.

So today, we are officially booting up our fight against climate change with a new Tech Zero Taskforce, made up of 16 of the UK's biggest and most innovative tech companies.

They range from Bulb to Olio to Starling Bank to Revolut.

Between them, they have transformed energy, banking and healthcare, and used tech to tackle the problems we face, like food waste.

Now they're going to engineer, hack and code their way back to lower emissions.

Their aim is to get 1,000 UK companies to sign up to Net Zero, to the pledge we have made, before the COP26 summit in November, and speed up the UK's race to Net Zero.

And today I can confirm that telecoms giant Vodafone is officially on board, as are Monzo and OakNorth.

And I really do hope that this marks a turning point in our fight against climate change. And it's right that the tech industry, as ever, leads the charge.

Firstly, like the rest of us, it's in the existential threat to the interests of these businesses. You really do need to act.

But it's also, I hope you agree, in tech businesses' economic self-interest to do so, as well.

Just the energy efficiencies alone that come from green investment are expected to unlock billions of pounds for companies, according to some estimates. Think about the value that brings. And that's not counting the revenue opportunities from low-carbon goods and services.

So the digital drive to Net Zero is also an economic one, and I believe, a profitable one.

It's no accident that the greentech revolution is kicking off here in the UK – the tech capital of Europe.

We're by far the biggest hub for tech firms and for venture capital funding.

And I know we were discussing this earlier: unicorn is one of those slightly hackneyed phrases now, but we are home to 99 unicorns and counting.

And of course, as you were saying Charlie, the government is pushing an unashamedly pro-tech agenda for the coming years, so that we can continue to attract top talent, help our brilliant tech firms grow, and use digital innovation to fuel an era of tech growth.

And I do believe we are already seeing this golden age for UK tech.

But my aim today, as the Tech Zero Taskforce comes together for the first

time, is to make clear that you have this government's full support.

I'm keen to know what more we can do to help you achieve your goal, and how government can throw its backing behind some of the most talented people in tech and tackle one of the greatest challenges of our time.

And that's the ambition we're setting out today. And without further ado, I'll hand back to you, Tabitha.

[15,000 trees planted in Keighley to reduce flood risk and mitigate climate change](#)

The project, which is being led by the Environment Agency in partnership with Leeds City Council, is part of the Leeds Flood Alleviation Scheme Natural Flood Management (NFM) project, one of the largest NFM projects in the UK.

The newly planted trees will help reduce the risk of flooding locally and downstream and also enhance the town's green spaces.

A mix of birch, beech, oak, aspen, rowan, hornbeam, small-leaved lime and wild cherry were planted on six hectares at Damems Lane and Guardhouse Allotments.

Together with traditional engineering measures, between Leeds city centre and Apperley Bridge, 1,048 homes and 474 businesses will be better protected from flooding.

Fiona Sugden, Environment Agency's Leeds NFM Project Manager, said:

The creation of the new woodland areas will have multiple benefits for people and wildlife. Not only will they reduce flood risk locally and downstream in Leeds – they will also benefit the environment by creating new woodland habitat, boosting biodiversity, mitigating climate change and creating new green spaces for people to enjoy.

Tree planting provides so many benefits that we'll continue to work with Keighley Town Council to identify opportunities in the future.

Keighley Town Council Mayor, Councillor Julie Adams, said:

My fellow councillors and I are serious about addressing the issue

of climate change. We believe that reducing global warming is everyone's responsibility and that the best way to help local people to make a difference is to set practical examples of good practice and support activities that involve local people in taking action within their own neighbourhoods.

We have been committed to the creation of cleaner greener and safer communities since declaring a climate change emergency in July 2019 and a key objective of our Climate Change Action Plan is to significantly increase the number of trees planted within the Keighley Town Council Parish, create more wildlife habitats and conservation areas whilst significantly reducing the risk of flooding.

We are therefore delighted to have teamed up with the Environment Agency to create a fantastic lasting and inspirational resource for future generations.

Councillor Helen Hayden, Leeds City Council's Executive Member for Infrastructure and Climate, said:

Taking a catchment wide approach to flood risk management has meant we have looked at the whole of the River Aire catchment to provide cross cutting benefits.

Planting trees in Keighley will not only bring environmental benefits locally but it will also make a big difference further downstream in Leeds as trees help to slow and store the flow of heavy rainfall and flood waters. This is critical if we are to build our resilience to climate change and reduce the risk of flooding to communities.

This natural flood management project forms part of the second phase of the Leeds Flood Alleviation Scheme, which is being led by Leeds City Council, working with the Environment Agency. This phase got underway in 2019 and aims to invest £112.1 million in flood prevention measures for areas upstream of Leeds city centre, to better protect 1,048 homes and 474 businesses.

Natural Flood Management offers potential for climate mitigation, for example, creating wetlands, restoring our uplands and planting trees can help to capture tonnes of carbon from the atmosphere.

For more information about the Leeds Flood Alleviation Scheme visit www.leeds.gov.uk/fas.

If you have land and would like to know more about how you could be involved in an NFM project, please get in touch with the project team at: LeedsFAS.nfm@environment-agency.gov.uk

*[NFM] natural flood management

Defending Democracy – Policy Exchange Speech

For an elected politician, the second American president John Adams was strikingly pessimistic about democracy. ‘Remember...it never lasts long’, he once warned, but ‘soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself.

‘There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide’, he said.

President Adams made this glum pronouncement in a letter written in 1814. With the benefit of 200 years’ hindsight we can agree he was quite wrong that democracy has a death-wish.

We all want ours to prosper. And that’s why we can’t afford to be complacent about the state of democracy either. Because liberal, open societies like ours need to look after ourselves. Especially now, when democracy across the world is under threat.

We are witnessing what Freedom House describes as a democratic recession, with their Freedom in the World Index showing a decline for the fifteenth consecutive year. Autocratic states are seeking to strengthen their grip on power by silencing criticism. The UK stands as a beacon for the idea that strong governments do not stifle genuine political debate – we thrive on it. We must stand against those who seek to undermine the international institutions and rules-based systems that the UK champions at home and around the world.

The values and ideals that have fostered widespread peace and prosperity – a system of governing and living that has people’s freedom and choices at its heart and – let’s not forget – a system that can even remove the government without resorting to a civil war or coup d’etat. All these are seen by autocratic regimes as an existential threat.

Those adversaries favour control, corruption and conformity. We fight for freedom, responsibility, enterprise and tolerance. They have a vested interest in democracy failing. And these regimes are increasingly brazen in advancing their objectives and undermining ours.

Over hundreds of years of our own history, we have developed our democracy into the one where we all have a say, where it is possible for all of us to register to vote, to make our choice, to campaign, or indeed to stand to represent our community. One where the government is accountable and the people’s decision matters. One where people can trust the institutions that are here to serve them.

And as stewards of this rich heritage, we want British democracy to continue to thrive. We will keep the UK’s democracy modern, secure, transparent, and

fair.

The Integrated Review recently set out our work and aims very clearly in this regard. To be open also requires us to be secure: protecting our people, our homeland and our democracy is the first duty of any government. Our record of standing up to threats is robust and we continue to do so now, alongside our partners. As we saw at the recent G7 summits, it is crucial for us to work together to protect our democracy and strengthen the rules-based international system.

A large part of this also starts with what we are doing at home. So today I'm going to explore how we're doing that through the Defending Democracy programme, and through upcoming legislation announced in last month's Queen's Speech.

May 2021 elections

I'm going to touch first on the elections we've just seen this year. I don't know what you were up to in the run-up to the May elections this year, but even as most MPs and all kinds of other politicians and their teams across Great Britain were pounding the socially-distanced streets, my particular job was to make sure the elections could happen at all.

There were successful elections for local authorities, mayors, Police & Crime Commissioners. Scotland and Wales also held parliamentary elections – all in all, the largest and most complex sets of elections for years, with many of them having been delayed for a year by the Covid pandemic.

Free and fair elections are of course the cornerstone of any democracy. To deliver them safely and securely in 2021 we had to work hard to get the right measures in place.

On a personal note, as Dean kindly referred to, you may know I've been having treatment for breast cancer and indeed that's why I can't be with you in person today. So I knew first-hand how some people would prefer to vote by post or by proxy, and that people needed confidence that polling stations were safe too.

Success owed much to the vaccine programme, our social distancing measures, and to the Government's faith that elections are a vital part of the fabric of the nation, not a nice-to-have. Presiding Officers and Returning Officers were provided with around £32million in extra funding. Week by week we kept watch and supported them to succeed. For example, we helped ensure that polling stations had enough staff and we are hugely grateful to the thousands of volunteers who helped run the polls. I would like to thank all Returning Officers and their teams for their great feat of public service.

Now when the Twitter hashtag 'dogs-at-polling-stations' begins to trend and labradoodle retweets overtake Laura Kuenssberg, you know it must be polling day. I was delighted that once again, our healthy, resilient democracy can prevail even in the most challenging circumstances.

So those behind the scenes deserve our gratitude, because they enable

citizens to choose. It's also vital that the government backs their role with the right legislative and policy framework.

In particular, the work to protect our democracy is supported through the Defending Democracy programme, which I initiated and was announced in 2019 to draw together expertise and support a whole-of-government approach.

So today I want to explore the good progress we are making against our long-term objectives, and announce some further policy measures that will be introduced through the new Elections Bill unveiled in the Queen's Speech.

There are four core elements to our Defending Democracy programme: to strengthen the integrity of UK elections; to protect our democratic processes and institutions, including from interference; to empower British citizens to have their say and respect open debate; and to promote a healthy information environment by tackling disinformation.

Starting with the integrity of UK elections. This is of course based on transparency and fairness. That is why we are introducing a new law on electoral integrity which will include reforms to political financing, campaigning and advertising.

Campaigners will need to register if they are spending over £10,000 across the UK on political campaigning during a regulated election period. We are also bringing in tighter rules to reduce the risk of ineligible overseas involvement by ensuring that campaign spending can come only from sources that have a genuine and legitimate interest in UK elections.

Today I am providing a statement to Parliament setting out the details of this regime. By providing these clear rules – and a shared understanding of those rules – will help ensure that voters can make an informed choice and benefit from a level playing field.

Our reforms to online and digital campaigning will increase transparency, and make it harder for those who seek to influence the electorate to do this without declaring who they are. Regulation to date has not kept pace with the exponential growth in online political campaigning. Voters do not always know who is promoting the material, or on whose behalf.

That is why our new digital imprints regime will require those behind online political adverts and other digital campaigning material targeted at the UK electorate to declare themselves, all year round, wherever they may be in the world. Our new regime will strengthen public trust and ensure voters are informed about who is behind a campaign, empowering voters to make decisions.

Following the public consultation we ran last year, we have expanded our proposals to go even further by requiring that all paid-for digital political advertising include an imprint, regardless of who has promoted it, and whether it's election time or not, thus providing even greater levels of transparency to online campaigning. Proportionate and effective enforcement of these rules will also be crucial, of course, to ensuring these new rules deliver for voters. So we are also empowering the relevant authorities to

access the information they need, including from social media companies, to investigate suspected offences. Through these proposals we will be introducing some of the most comprehensive digital imprint rules in the world.

Tackling electoral fraud is another top priority. The 2014 election scandal in Tower Hamlets – where the mayoral contest was declared void after corrupt and illegal practices – exposed vulnerabilities in our system that leading international election observers and the Electoral Commission agree are a security risk. We have put in place a range of measures to ensure the security of our system, and we are now building on this work with our plans to introduce photo identification in polling stations.

This is the sign of a Government dedicated to upholding electoral integrity. The suggestion from critics that my motive is to stop people from voting, would be laughable, if it wasn't so dangerous for public trust. We made sure that, on the 6th of May, people affected by coronavirus could get an emergency proxy vote up until the evening of polling day. That allowed them still to have their say in the election without having to leave home – hardly the action of a government looking to shut down democracy.

What our plan, to introduce photo identification in polling stations in Great Britain, will do, is clamp down on crime. Stealing someone's vote is a crime. We know that not everyone has a passport or a driving licence, which is why a broad range of identification will be accepted and free Voter Cards will be available from local authorities to those who need them. And our experience in Northern Ireland, where people have had to show identification to vote since 1985, and photo identification since 2003, has been positive. Evidence shows that voter identification does not impact voter turnout and it has been operating there with ease for decades. It has helped tackle fraud and improved voter confidence. Indeed, data from our pilot evaluations in 2018 and 2019 show that the requirement to show identification increased voter confidence.

Defending Democracy's second area of focus is to protect UK democracy against cyber, personnel and physical security threats, including from foreign interference. This includes protective security measures, targeted briefings to ensure awareness of threats, and running a cross-government Election Cell to coordinate security preparations and responses for elections. To these we have added cyber programmes.

But we are also updating our laws to counter the evolving range of state threats. We know that elections are a key battleground – and that political parties, campaigners, and elections infrastructure can all be a target. Autocratic states thrive on disruption and uncertainty. The pandemic is just one of a number of issues that will affect both the threat we face and the Government's response. So our antagonists will be looking to undermine the UK by exploiting frailties, widening divisions in our society, and ultimately seeking to corrode the confidence and trust that is so integral to our system of democracy.

Our security services and law enforcement agencies need to be able to

respond. That is why we have just published a consultation on the Government's legislative proposals to counter state threats, which will provide the tools and powers needed to disrupt hostile activity, protect sensitive data, and safeguard our intellectual property.

We are seeking to modernise existing counter espionage laws to reflect the modern threat and legislative standards. These proposals will create new offences, tools and powers to detect, deter and disrupt hostile activity targeting the UK. And they will improve our ability to protect official data. We are also seeking views on Official Secrets Acts reform, as well as the creation of a Foreign Influence Registration Scheme which will be an important new tool to help combat espionage, interference and protect sensitive research.

Moving now to encouraging respectful debate, it is a sad fact that the volume and vicious nature of the abuse and intimidation aimed at those in public life too often deters talented people from entering a career of service, and risks corroding the core civic values we hold dear. The same goes for the media, and the vital role of journalists in reporting on our democratic processes and holding the government to account. It can be worst of all for women and people from minority backgrounds.

But it matters to all of us. Our politics are peaceful. Democracy should not be dangerous. And voters deserve better.

The Government has already taken action to address intimidation and safety of candidates and representatives. We have updated electoral law to ensure local candidates can choose for their home address to not be made public; the local authority area appears on the ballot paper instead. We have also worked with the Law Officers to publish new guidance from the Crown Prosecution Service on the laws on intimidation, and the wide range of areas in which intimidation can be prosecuted under existing laws.

But we're committed to doing more. That is why we have published, in draft, the Government's ground-breaking Online Safety legislation. Our plans will hold tech companies accountable with a legal duty of care, meaning they would need to have robust systems and processes in place to tackle illegal content, including illegal online abuse. The message is: 'Carry out your duties – or face enforcement action.' The Bill includes measures to make sure people can express themselves freely and participate in robust online debate – which supports a thriving, inclusive democracy.

Criminal law also has a key role in dealing with online abuse and must be fit for purpose. The Law Commission is examining ways to deal more effectively with co-ordinated harassment and abuse carried out by groups of people, and will publish their final recommendations this year.

Separately, through my Elections Bill we are also working to protect everyone against political intimidation, all year round but especially at election time. The Bill will introduce a new electoral sanction, so that somebody convicted of intimidating a candidate, future candidate, campaigner or elected representative will be banned for 5 years from standing for and

holding elective office. That's on top of their punishment for the original intimidatory offence, which might be a fine or imprisonment, depending on the severity of the crime. Voters do not expect to see violence at elections in our country and this measure helps voters, as well as activists, go about their democratic choice and activities in peace.

And turning, finally, to misinformation and disinformation, which we are working hard to tackle, and which many people are rightly concerned pose a threat to public safety, national security and ultimately our democratic values and principles.

Misinformation and disinformation – in all its many guises – goes back centuries. Now we have to address 21st century online chicanery. The UK is doing this in two ways: first, through a cross-government Counter Disinformation Unit to lead the fight against online misinformation and disinformation. And secondly, through legislation.

We welcome moves by social media giants to clue users up about what kind of content they're reading but it's clear more needs to be done. Again, the new Online Safety Bill will play an important role, backed up by Ofcom as regulator; in requiring the largest companies to address disinformation and misinformation that could cause significant physical or psychological harm to an individual. Companies face significant sanctions for failing in their duties.

The UK government is clear-eyed about the new global realities. Defending democracy – like tackling COVID and other challenges – requires international cooperation and collaboration. That's why I wanted to speak to you, as we proudly conclude hosting the G7 in Cornwall. Among a series of commitments to support open societies around the world, members recently announced they would be strengthening the Rapid Response Mechanism – a valuable multi-national forum for identifying and responding to diverse threats and evolving threats to our democracies. As part of this, we will be working with international partners, including NATO.

And taken together, the seven more um of our long-term thinking and approaches – the result of a great deal of work across government – supports the intent behind the Constitution, Democracy & Rights Commission manifesto commitment to look at how our democracy operates, and restore and uphold public trust in our institutions.

After the COVID 19 pandemic, just as the government is focusing on renewing and rebuilding our NHS, our education system and our justice system, so we are renewing the democracy that underpins everything else on which our country is founded.

This has been my pride as the Minister for the Constitution across nearly a decade: to ensure that the foundations are sound, and to enable my fellow citizens to make their choices. As I look back at the last year in particular – nationally, and indeed personally, I know what resilience and determination are. I want to bring those deeply-held values to bear as we keep our democracy modern, secure, transparent and fair. And that Dean, is what will

help all of us in this country enjoy a better way of life, now and in the future.

Making progress towards elections, ensuring human rights are protected, and upholding the rule of law in Mali

Thank you, Mr President and my thanks to SRSB El-Ghassim Wane and Ms Maiga for their perspectives and insights.

Mr President, first, like many of my Council colleagues, I am deeply concerned by the recent coup in Mali, and its consequences for the return to constitutional order, the stability of Mali and the wider region, and for the ability of state institutions to uphold the rule of law. And I join others in regretting the attack on MINUSMA yesterday.

The UK calls on the new transitional authorities to meet the conditions set by ECOWAS: in particular, to prepare for elections without delay, to ensure the unconditional release of those still detained, and make certain that the rest of the transition period is based on dialogue, consultation and compromise. As the Secretary-General sets out in his report, the former government had taken a number of steps in the right direction to make the political process more inclusive, and the needs and aspirations of Malians will be met through inclusive representation within government and the active, meaningful participation of all sectors of society, including women.

Second, we urge the new transitional authorities to uphold the commitments made by the former transitional government with respect to tackling impunity for violations and abuses of human rights. We welcome the trial and conviction of those responsible for killing a UN peacekeeper, but many more Malians are still waiting for justice. So we urge the transitional authorities to make progress on trials and prosecutions, to carry out a full and transparent investigation into the investigation of the CMA president, and to renew efforts to protect civilians.

Third, we urge the transitional authorities to renew their commitment to the Peace Agreement. Progress depends on full ownership by all signatory parties and their involvement in political and decision-making processes. We support the Secretary-General's call for an impact-oriented and people-centred strategy for the centre – a strategy that brings together security, governance and development responses under a clear, overarching vision. This strategy needs to be owned by the government, with MINUSMA present to support its implementation. The meeting we hosted with France, Norway and Mali last month on the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Mali demonstrated the real impact and value of increasing women's participation in

the Peace Process.

In conclusion, Mr President, the UK condemns the coup and stands ready to support the efforts of ECOWAS and the UN to ensure compliance with ECOWAS conditions, to make progress towards elections, and to help ensure human rights are protected and promoted, and the rule of law upheld.

Thank you.

[UK underlines commitment to Western Balkans with extension of troops in Kosovo](#)

News story

UK troops will continue to contribute to the NATO Mission in Kosovo (KFOR) until at least 2023.



UK troops have helped to promote peace as part of KFOR since 1999

The continuing presence of British Army personnel in the NATO force, which for over two decades has helped maintain peace and stability in Kosovo, signals the UK's ongoing commitment to the wider Western Balkans region's security, stability and prosperity.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

NATO is the bedrock of UK security and it is because our Armed Forces step forward to protect peace alongside our partners that it remains so. The extension of our commitment to KFOR underlines our unwavering commitment to the Western Balkans region, where NATO has helped to bring stability for over two decades.

The UK has been a key contributor to the UN-mandated NATO force, known as KFOR, since it first entered Kosovo in 1999 as a peacekeeping force to bring peace and stability following the conflict of the 1990s.

UK forces have since worked to enhance KFOR's Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance capability, significantly increasing the mission commanders' situational awareness – ensuring the operation can provide a safe and secure environment for the entire population. KFOR acts as one of the main security providers in Kosovo, with troops contributed by some 30 nations including Italy, Turkey, Poland and the US, as well as the UK. The UK's contribution includes a battalion-sized high readiness Strategic Reserved Force based in the UK, ready to deploy at short notice.

As set out in the recently-published Integrated Review into security, defence, development and foreign policy and Defence Command Paper, the UK remains committed to NATO which remains the bedrock of our security.

It comes after the Prime Minister announced in November an increase in Defence funding of over £24-billion across the next four years, enabling our Armed Forces to adapt to meet future threats.

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