



*Lord Harris of Haringey  
U.K. House of Lords*

***Zoom Meeting  
with  
Lord Toby Harris  
Chair of the United Kingdom National  
Preparedness Commission***

***“Promoting Better Preparedness for a  
Major Crisis or Incident”***

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Transcript (edited)***

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**DR. ROGER WEISSINGER-BAYLON:**

This is our first Zoom meeting. It is quite a change from the Hotel National des Invalides, the King’s Council Chamber, where we’ve met together so many times. But as we prepare for our next international workshop on global security in Paris, we have to recognise that Covid makes it rather difficult to meet before October.

At the suggestion of our French government partners, the Institut des hautes études de défense nationale, we are beginning a series of small Zoom meetings to prepare some of the principal themes that we hope to address later on this year. The niche that we are striving for would be to have a fairly diversified group, small, intimate and a fairly short meeting; just an hour, with 30 minutes extra for those who want to stay on.

Our first meeting of the series is today, with Lord Toby Harris. And our next meeting will be on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April, with Lord David Puttnam, also of the UK House of Lords, who has done a long study of the relationship between digital technology and democracy. That will be a fantastic subject. Toby has been a keynote speaker at our recent workshops, and you all know him well. He’s now the Chairman of the United Kingdom National Preparedness Commission, which he founded late last year.



Given the current global situation, with issues like Covid and global warming, and cyber threats such as the recent horrible Solar Winds attack in the US, there is no better theme for our first Zoom meeting. And as I think you all agree, there's no better speaker than Toby Harris for this meeting. So with that, I turn this over to you Toby, with our warmest thanks for joining us today. We'll have time for Q&A after Toby's presentation, which I think will be around 15 minutes.

### **LORD TOBY HARRIS:**

The most over-quoted ancient Chinese curse (I have to admit it's actually the only one I know) is, "May you live in interesting times." Certainly, 2020 was interesting, and not the year that any of us expected. If we go back to the beginning of that year, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, the World Health Organisation tweeted, and I quote, "#China has reported to WHO a cluster of #pneumonia cases with no deaths, in Wuhan, Hubei province. Investigations are underway to identify the cause of the illness." And that, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, was virtually the first public announcement of what we would come to call Covid-19.

The Nobel physicist, Niels Bohr, is reported to have said that prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future. And certainly if we go back to the early months of last year, few would have predicted the extent of the global pandemic, or that we would have to face an even more intense second spike of cases. But we should have been ready. If you look at the course of previous pandemics, Covid has not been so different. The Spanish flu hit a peak in

**The assessment was that future diseases like Covid would have a "low likelihood of spreading to the UK."**

the spring of 1918, and then there was a more intense second peak six to nine months later. The bad news is that there was then a third peak, six months after that.

Of course, epidemics have occurred traumatically throughout history. Certainly, pandemic flu has been in the top tier of the UK's National Risk Register since it was first published over a decade ago, but Covid is not flu. And there was an assessment in the UK register of what were called new and emerging infectious diseases, which I suppose Covid would fall into. But the assessment was that they would have a "low likelihood of spreading to the UK" and "the impact could be on the scale of the SARS outbreak in Toronto, Canada, with 251 cases over several months."

So, the risk in the UK was logged but it was not assigned with a sufficiently serious level of risk, and it was felt that the preparations in place for a pandemic flu outbreak would probably be sufficient. I'm tempted to dwell at length about what went wrong, and what was wrong with that assessment, in particular about the preparations, but I will actually resist that.



Now, the UK was of course not alone; most governments had failures either in preparation or in execution of their Covid response. But no crisis is ever what you plan for, and after this or any other major event, many organisations, many countries, often realise that their risk and response systems have not protected them. Indeed too often people feel that they have dealt with a potential problem by the mere act of putting it on their risk register. We have all been there. That risk register is often taken as the last item at a busy board meeting, relegated to the final few minutes as people are packing up their papers to leave.

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And then when something does happen, when there is a major shock to the system, many organisations pat themselves on the back that they've been resilient if they've managed to bounce back quickly, and they can speedily return to normal operation. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's my belief that the ambition should be greater. You have to learn from what has happened, not merely so that this particular eventuality can be dealt with if it occurs again, but rather so as to toughen the organisation, making it better able to respond and to avert some completely different threat. I suppose the old motto is that which does not kill us makes us stronger.

There needs to be a cyclical process of continually learning from experience, and using that learning to strengthen the organisation to be ready for the next crisis. And of course if there is no crisis, practice and exercise for one. Don't simply, as so many senior executives do, breathe a sigh of relief if you've even taken part in the exercise when it's over; instead assess what didn't work well and what could have gone better, and fix it for the next time. And there will be a next time. At the beginning of last month, Dr. Mike Ryan, who was the head of the Emergencies Programme at WHO said, and again I'm quoting him, "Covid was a wake-up call. And while the pandemic has been severe, and has affected every corner of the planet," he said, "It's not necessarily the big one."

**"Covid was severe and a wake-up call ... but it's not necessarily the big one."**

Now I chair this new National Preparedness Commission in the UK. It had its first meeting in November and had been in planning for most of the year, in fact before Covid. The commission brings together business, government, academia and civil society. Our purpose is to promote better preparedness in the UK for a major crisis or incident. At that first meeting we were warned that while 2020 had been a difficult year, we are living in a world that is increasingly volatile and unstable. Meaning that as a nation, we need to strengthen our resilience and preparedness against the shocks that are likely as a consequence.



Now in the UK a new edition of the National Risk Register was slipped out just before Christmas – always a good time for releasing public documents. It maps 38 major risks that face the UK, including widespread power failure, flooding, adverse terrestrial or space weather, terrorist attacks on crowded places or transport, cyber attacks on critical infrastructure or services, chemical, biological and radiological attacks, and so on.

**Climate change will lead to extreme weather—floods, droughts, storms, heat waves and heavy rainfall.**

But you will also know that there are a series of global trends that are likely to impact directly or indirectly the UK, and for that matter every other nation in the coming years. Now I could talk at length about this, and we may want to talk about it in discussion, but they include first climate change. Now that will lead to more extreme weather events, with floods, droughts, storms, heat waves and heavy rainfall becoming more intense and more frequent in all parts of the world.

**Parts of the world will become increasingly uninhabitable, driving refugee movements, food and water shortages.**

Some parts of the world will become increasingly uninhabitable, and that will drive huge movements of refugees, create shortages of food and water, and will have an

impact on global supply chains. That in turn will produce political instability that will spill over national borders; and with modern communications, we'll find that played out on the streets of our major polyglot cities, whether they're hundreds or thousands of miles away.

Second, we will see increasing competition for natural resources and insecurity in supply. The control of energy resources will give political leverage to those with that control; we're seeing that play out between Russia and Western Europe. Similarly, access to minerals, and in particular rare earth elements, which are essential for some technologies, shortages of those will become more and more significant. And just look at who is cornering those markets for those rare earth minerals.

**Rare earth elements are essential for some technologies, their shortages will become increasingly significant—and look who is cornering them!**

And third – and this is all interrelated – there is a changing world order. This is a time of rapid geopolitical change, as US pre-eminence gives way to a multi-polar world; China emerging as a

dominant, if not *the* dominant, economic power, and Russia using hybrid means to maximise its influence. At the same time there will be increasingly powerful non-state actors, who may see themselves as not being bound by national laws and regulations; tech companies, but also people engaged in illicit trade, international crime or terrorism.



Nearer to home, the UK – and this, I don't think, is unique to my country – faces such factors as the vulnerability of its existing, aging, critical infrastructure. Railways, roads, pumping stations, other vital services, have suffered from decades of under investment and often inadequate maintenance and replacement regimes.

And then there is our growing reliance, in the UK and in any major nation, on ever more complex and interconnected systems. This creates vulnerabilities, as in critical services new systems are overlaid on top of legacy systems, in a way which

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in some cases is now almost impossible to disentangle and beyond the experience of many of those responsible for running and maintaining them. Now, that creates its own risks, even before you consider the possibility of external threats. We've just seen power supplies in Texas fall over. And whether that's an external threat or simply systems breaking down, or whether it was entirely weather related, it indicates a vulnerability.

Events around the globe will affect each and every country, potentially dramatically. Some crises will arise suddenly and unexpectedly, requiring urgent action, others will develop over decades. So what we need is to be better prepared for whatever may occur. And that leads me to the other issues that our National Preparedness Commission will be considering. What should we prepare for? How much preparedness is enough, and how do we finance the necessary investment? We could probably spend several hours on each of those.

The difficulty is that to be properly prepared and resilient is expensive. And we've spent decades moving our economies, moving our systems, towards a "just in time" philosophy, which is apparently much more efficient and saves costs. But the reality is that if we were to adopt a preparedness philosophy, we would need a "just in case" philosophy. We have to

**The "just in time" philosophy needs to be replaced with a "just in case" philosophy – which will offer redundancy and resilience.**

countenance – and this goes against all of that efficiency and just in time stuff – we have to countenance building in redundancy and eschewing interdependence.

As a recovering politician, I know how difficult it is for our elected politicians to devote resources – by which I mean the public's tax contributions – to projects that do not come to fruition by the time of the next election or the one after it. Building a resilience that is probably invisible, and may never be needed for an eventuality that may not happen, is even more difficult. And it is often impossible to prove that your actions have prevented something happening; particularly if that hypothetical event is at some indeterminate time in the future, and almost certainly long after your time in office is forgotten. Of course, if you fail to do it and



it is needed, you will be pilloried. If, by then, anyone remembers who the politician was who didn't act.

So these dilemmas are difficult for politicians, and it's difficult for us to devise how you can build them into the system. None of these questions are easy, but one thing we should learn from 2020 is that we cannot go on burying our heads in the sand. We need to be better prepared for the unexpected. The lesson for all of us, the overriding lesson in every country, is that we have probably not been investing sufficiently in our preparedness and resilience.

**We need to prepare not only for the “black swans” – previously unobserved, high impact, hard to predict rare events; but also for “black jellyfish” and “black elephants.”**

Above all, we must be prepared to expect the unexpected.

I rather like the taxonomy which says we have to be ready not only for the black swans – previously unobserved, high

impact, hard to predict rare events; but also the black jellyfish – things we think we know about and understand, but which turn out to be more complex and uncertain, sometimes with a long tail and a nasty sting at the end; and then the black elephants – challenges visible to everyone but which no one wants to deal with. And we've got to get beyond simply admiring the scale of such problems.

This is not just a nation state issue; internationally we have to be better prepared. We will not truly escape the current pandemic until the world is vaccinated. Of course, if climate change is to be addressed, there has to be global action. In an increasingly complex and interconnected planet, while one nation may choose to freeload, if too many do, we all fail. The existential issue for humanity is how long will it be before that truth is universally accepted.

**If climate change is to be addressed, there has to be global action in an increasingly complex and interconnected planet.**

In any country, preparedness and resilience for any serious threat or crisis cannot just be a matter for the national government. Preparedness matters for every neighbourhood and for every local

administration, and indeed some matters are best organised at a community level. Every business, and every organisation, needs to be more resilient. They need to have considered and planned for how they would respond to transport disruption, a power failure, an inability to access the internet, and for that matter, a global health crisis.

The same principle applies to each of us at a household and individual level. There is more of a tradition of that in some countries than in others; earthquake drills are a regular feature in some places, others are used to periodic floods or severe storms. Making every organisation and everybody more resilient creates a sort of herd immunity for a society, which is then better



able to address future global crises, whether it's a new pandemic or a massive cyber attack, or climate change.

Often the responses needed are threat neutral; the steps necessary are the same whatever the hazard. The message is resilience needs to be designed in and part of society's fabric. I said earlier on we must be prepared to expect the unexpected, those with an Anglo-Saxon heritage will know that "be prepared" was of course Lord Baden-Powell's motto for the Scout movement, so that automatically and instinctively the Scouts did the right thing at the right moment. Now I'm not sure that the 1908 edition of Scouting for Boys, or the 1912 version for girls, called "How girls can help build up the Empire", actually spelt out the implications of a global pandemic, but they did at least in embryo equip Baden-Powell's Scouts with the principles of strategic risk management.

**Planning and responding to risks is not cost free, but not doing so is worse.**

Managing to be actively resilient is good management, and good government. It means your organisation, your country, is agile and innovative.

It means you're empowering your people and engaging with your communities. Your organisation and your country is likely to be more efficient. It's more likely to be successful. So planning and responding to risks is not cost free, but not doing so is worse. Or as John F. Kennedy put it, "There are risks and costs to action, but they are far less than the long range costs of comfortable inaction." Thank you.

**DR. ROGER WEISSINGER-BAYLON:**

Thanks Toby, that's a wonderful way to kick off our very first Zoom meeting.

You mentioned that you're a recovering politician. I can imagine the political resistance to the budgetary implications of what you're talking about. The shift from just in time, which is so reassuring financially, to just in case, which does have budgetary implications, and especially implications that won't turn into benefits until after the next election cycle is over.

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