



Scottish Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Promoting Scotland Internationally, HC 625](#)

Monday 20 March 2023

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Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Deidre Brock; Sally-Ann Hart; Christine Jardine; Douglas Ross; Dr Philippa Whitford.

Questions 128-212

Witnesses

I: Reuben Aitken, Managing Director, International Operations, Scottish Development International, and Dr Stephen Baker, Regional Director Inward Investment, Asia Pacific; Regional Director Japan, South Korea, Australia & New Zealand, Scottish Development International.

II: Rt Hon Angus Robertson MSP, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture at Scottish Government, and Scott Wightman, Director for External Affairs, Scottish Government.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Reuben Aitken and Dr Stephen Baker.

Q128 **Chair:** Welcome to the Scottish Affairs Committee and our third oral evidence session in our inquiry into promoting Scotland internationally. We are delighted to be joined by Scottish Development International, whom I will now allow to introduce themselves and to say what they do in their organisation.

Reuben Aitken: Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today. It is an important inquiry and we are delighted to be able to contribute to the Committee's important work.

My name is Reuben Aitken. I am the managing director of Scottish Enterprise's international operations. That means that I head up Scottish Development International, which works on behalf of all the enterprise agencies in Scotland to promote Scotland's trade and investment agenda.

I am delighted to be able to introduce Dr Stephen Baker, who is with me. He is normally based in Tokyo, but is back in the country. I hope he can bring to life some examples today from an in-market perspective. He is our regional head for inward investment from Asia-Pac, or Asia-Pacific.

Q129 **Chair:** Thank you for the concise introductions. You gave us a detailed contribution to the inquiry, for which we are very grateful—it helped us to get a sense of the type of work that you do—but for those listening perhaps, for those paying attention to what we do and for the record, will you tell us a little about what SDI does in particular? Perhaps your colleague from Tokyo can give us an example of how this all works. What is the added value you give to the mission of making sure that Scotland is adequately and satisfactorily promoted internationally?

Reuben Aitken: As Scottish Enterprise, we are focused on three things, three Is: innovation, investment and internationalisation. That is where SDI comes in—I will use acronyms, so please stop me if I am using any without explanation—

Chair: No, we have it now—Scottish Development International, SDI.

Reuben Aitken: We are focused on all three of those Is from an international perspective. My team is 290 people, across 23 countries and in 34 locations. That might sound like a lot, but we are spread pretty thin when you think about the global footprint. What we do is make sure that we drive forward the investment and trade agenda.

We have three cornerstone plans, which the Scottish Government have published: the one about growing exports is "A Trading Nation"; on the inward investment side, it is "Shaping Scotland's Economy"; and on the capital side, it is "Investing with Purpose". The team is about promoting Scotland as a place to start, scale and internationalise your business. We do the exporting agenda and the attracting inward investment agenda.



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Both are what we lead on in SDI, and we do that pan-Scotland. From Elgin down to the Borders, and the islands, we are it.

Q130 Chair: How do you do that type of work specifically? I have been to a couple of your missions abroad and been impressed by how you do things—the structure and organisation—so what specifically do you do to get people interested in investing in Scotland, for example?

Reuben Aitken: We try to make sure that we have a really clear proposition and make a really clear sales pitch. A lot of the team come from a sales background and, my word, if you want to sell anything, you want to sell Scotland, because we have some incredible assets and some incredible talents that we are delighted to be able to showcase to the world.

At the moment, think about the opportunities in ScotWind, for example—over 20 GW of wind opportunity—and the possibility to build on a fantastic hydrogen economy, anchoring that supply chain in Scotland. We are working through the opportunity very systematically, then dealing with those companies and the investors overseas to showcase why Scotland is the place that they need to be.

Some of that is large-scale infrastructure investment, and we can do that, but we also work with smaller companies, which are starting out on their trading journey and need our support and in-market expertise to navigate some of the challenges they face. The skills and the talent are there, but helping them raise their ambition and deliver in-market is critical.

We have examples from some Members' constituencies, which we can talk through with the practicals. Stephen, do you want to come in on any of that?

Dr Stephen Baker: I will just mention an example. One of the key things, especially when we look at inward investment, is to move way beyond location solely. It's to focus on concrete, geographically linked opportunities. For instance, with ScotWind that means supply chain gaps that could be appropriately filled through inward investment. Then we target specific companies with a proposition around those supply chain gaps in the example that I'm giving. So it is a very targeted approach.

More broadly, when we do trade promotion, we might participate in trade shows. We have just had one—offshore wind, Japan—and it might be specific promotions with a department store chain, for example. This is beyond the general baseline marketing activity that happens.

Q131 Chair: The next question is about what you consider are key industrial strengths for Scotland. You have mentioned Scotland on a couple of occasions already. Is this the type of work that you are engaged in just now to try and get that type of investment? What other particular endeavours in Scotland do you recognise as part of the strength that we have?



Reuben Aitken: We are trying to be really systematic in how we approach this, given the tightness of the resources that we have. For a trading nation, there is a very clear characterisation of the companies that we want to work with. There are about 1,200, so it is narrow and focused, and that means we can deliver more for those companies. It is starting out with those that are global by birth and therefore can export globally right from the get-go, or those that are already dominant exporters that might want to enter into new markets. There is also working with companies who are what we politely call sleeping giants—those who could be exporting more, could be reaching into more markets, and might need our help to tap into those. We have segmented the industry base in Scotland and then really targeted our support to push that forward and drive that.

We have done a similar thing on inward investment. We are focused on nine priority areas and we are honing that in so that we can really target it, so, advance manufacturing, and Steve talked about the example of ScotWind. There will obviously be some serious manufacturing opportunities for Scotland in that, but we have successes previously in financial services and the tech sector right across the economy and right across the country.

Q132 **Chair:** How easy is it to sell Scotland internationally? We have had several conversations already in this inquiry about the strength of the Scottish brand, how it is perceived internationally and the types of links and connections that Scotland has had historically and culturally. How would you describe Scotland's brand? Is it effective? Is it working for us?

Reuben Aitken: From our point of view, I would not want to sell anything else. I think it is a fantastic brand that we have to sell. It is not just me that thinks that—16% of inward investors would rank Scotland as the top FDI—foreign direct investment—destination. That is something that we should be rightfully proud of. I would like it to be a higher percentage than that—I am never satisfied—but there are a lot of folks who are impressed with what our offering is. Year on year we have consistently been—outside London—the top FDI destination. In the EY attractiveness survey we have consistently performed well. It is something that Steve and I love to sell. We are not selling off the Crown jewels here. We are trying to make sure we plug strategic gaps in supply chains, improve Scotland's productivity, and look for strategic partnerships where international partners can add real value.

Q133 **Chair:** Is there any sector you have identified that we could do better with? In Scotland, food and drink is a huge Scottish success story. We have massive exports. Is there anything that you have looked at and thought, "We could be doing better if we just tried a little bit harder and maybe pushed this up the agenda a bit more"?

Reuben Aitken: Definitely. There is one thing we are really keen on. The Scotland brand can be seen as tartan and shortbread and all those sorts of things, which is lovely and has its place, but what we are about is making sure that that culture and history is cherished, but is not the only thing that people think of when they think of Scotland. I want to showcase our



innovation. Space is a great example. We have had some fantastic companies and start-ups that are scaling up pretty fast. We had Anousheh Ansari recently visit as part of an inward mission. She is the first female commercial space explorer, and she said, "I cannot believe that this Scottish ecosystem is here and I didn't know about it." From our point of view, we need to showcase some of that talent. We are putting more small satellites into orbit than anywhere else in Europe.

Chair: You mentioned space. Just by good fortune, Phillipa Whitford is the next on the list to ask questions, and I am pretty certain that space will feature among them

Q134 **Dr Whitford:** Yes, I have it written down here. Last month, I was lucky enough to be invited to speak in Houston about the Scottish space industry. I met your colleagues who are based in Houston. Obviously, they have an energy slant on this. There is a lot of looking at Scottish companies' potential to engage in geothermal there because of their drilling experience, but they were not really aware at all of Scotland's space industry. Glasgow makes more satellites than anywhere outside California and is looking at an end-to-end low Earth orbit for Earth observation, so its focus is very much environmental, and we have that from iconcept analytics in Edinburgh. We are not telling people in Scotland that, but we obviously have a job to do. It is exactly that point. Even things that came back in other parts of this report, such as make more of Burns night, make more of St Andrew's day, are great, but we need to be showing Scotland as a modern, academic place—with our universities and our innovation. Yes, there is hydrogen renewable energy, but there are also things such as space. How can you keep people who are scattered all over the place up to date with innovation and the new emerging businesses in Scotland so that they know what is happening?

Reuben Aitken: That has been very challenging, particularly during the pandemic. Part of that is that if you are selling the fantastic Scottish ecosystem in our business communities overseas, you do need to understand the warp and weft of it. We have not been able to get people back here during the pandemic. Our colleagues in China, for example, have been in all sorts of lockdowns. Trying to make sure that we rekindle things with real gusto is part of it. We are also looking to hone in on a sharper set of priorities, so that we can be really clear and cascade messaging on those.

Scotland does have a lot of strengths, and the risk in this environment is that we can end up trying to be all things to all people. We should be using those Burns suppers and those St Andrew's days as hooks for us to showcase that innovation and that technological advantage. Mangata is a fantastic example of that. This is genuinely transformational not just for the economy of Ayrshire, but for the space sector in Scotland, in the UK. SDI was before my time, so I do not feel that I can claim any credit for this, but, organisationally, we were critical to landing that investment in Scotland. What we see now is building an ecosystem around that and building its supply chain in Scotland, so that we can anchor the high-value end of space right here.



Q135 Dr Whitford: We have all learned to use Zoom, which was something that we had no idea of three years ago. Surely, we could use that in an effective way—running webinars out of Scotland from companies to update people who are based in the other markets.

Reuben Aitken: Yes, we do. The whole team gets together at least once a month across different time zones, where we showcase new edge opportunities, market developments, and insights from partners across our footprint, or from across the UK Government's footprint. We are doing that, but we are looking to do more. There is also something about being able to get people back and making those connections with, as you said, our academic institutions. It is then easier to have that Zoom call once you have done that face-to-face engagement and really rekindled some of those relationships.

Dr Stephen Baker: May I add to that? Running Zoom webinars out of Scotland gives us a base of activity, but one of the real values that we do in-market is the translation of those messages into locally impactful messages, especially when we are using this targeted approach with companies. Sometimes that material needs to be presented in a different language. We will also do in-company seminars so that a company can get a broad base of its members onboard with thinking about Scotland and investing in Scotland.

Q136 Dr Whitford: In your written submission, you suggested that there are obvious advantages to being based in the FCDO network in the embassies, but that you thought UK Government partners could engage more strategically with SDI's overseas teams and also increase the promotion of Scotland's strengthened capabilities—for example, broadening that out. What would that engagement look like, and what kind of global opportunities are there? How would you go about improving that relationship in the embassies and out into SDI?

Reuben Aitken: I will kick off and then pass the banner over to Steve. I think we should flag that there are some fantastic examples of this happening already, where we work hand in glove with missions overseas. We are on the platform with the FCDO in all markets except Germany and the US at the moment. I had the deputy trade commissioner from Latin America phone me up last week saying, "We are bringing trade missions to Scotland, and we are missing some companies in this particular sector. Can you help us out here?" That is a great example of us working collaboratively and them seeing us as part of their team. Likewise, with His Majesty's trade commissioner to Europe saying, "Some of my folks don't understand the Scottish offering in this particular sector. Can you help us upskill them so they can really be part of promoting Scotland?" There are some really good examples.

There is more that we can do, and it's a mixed bag. Sometimes, people feel slightly nervous about working with SDI and with the Scottish offering, or see it as something for SDI to do, rather than a core part of their agenda. Making sure they are really clear on those global opportunities might mean a bit of familiarisation for them of what the



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offering and the strengths of Scotland really are. We are very happy to do that, obviously, but it should be a core part of the work and the agenda of other partners across Government. Steve, you have some practical examples.

Dr Stephen Baker: I think, Dr Whitford, that it is really a work in progress. There is always more that can be done. I think we have reached a good level with colleagues in Asia, who see that we can bring something to the meetings that they hold that goes beyond the broader marketing messages to actual concrete calls for action for the company to take. But I think we still need to go even further than that.

One of the things we did most recently, which was viewed as a trial in Asia, was having one of our DBT colleagues from Taiwan come to join us in Tokyo. She worked with us for two months. The idea was that she would come to understand what the Scottish opportunities were, and we would help her, while she was in Tokyo, to target Taiwanese companies to do that. That was a very well-received activity. I think we always work well together, but if we are not working together, we are actually not working together. This type of activity where we really are joined up is key.

Q137 **Dr Whitford:** How would you go about promoting that? You are seeing some places where it is brilliant and other places where it is not really happening. How do you get everywhere to come up to the level where you think it works really well?

Reuben Aitken: Without wanting to make suggestions for the Committee that are too bold, I guess it is something the UK Government could be encouraged to do systematically. At the moment, I think it sometimes happens because of the understandings of particular ambassadors or a particular head of mission who gets devolution and is comfortable in that space and says, "This is fine; of course we can work collaboratively. A win for Scotland is a win for the UK. We are all talking it up." We could somehow encourage that to be a systematic approach across Ministries and Departments, so that it isn't seen as an outlier—and it is not an outlier at the moment—or a personal decision, and, instead, is just part of how they go about doing business.

Also, there have been some examples of familiarisation, where people who are going off to postings would come and meet with me or some other colleagues and say, "Before I go out to market, I really wanted to understand the space sector in Scotland, because I think there is a strategic join-up here. Can you help me out?" We are always delighted to contribute to that, but it could be more systematic, I think, if that makes sense.

Dr Stephen Baker: Could I add one last point on that? One of the things for our UK Government colleagues on platform is they want to be fair to all the devolveds, and there is this awareness of, "We don't want to be unfair, and maybe for the devolveds this is going to be a competitive opportunity." But actually, when I talk with my colleagues across the



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devolveds, we don't think like that. Most of the things that we are promoting are geographically linked, and companies are going to talk to many people anyway. I think we just need to be more comfortable with working as a group and focusing on where our strengths are and promoting those actual opportunities. I think people need to become comfortable with that mode of work.

Q138 **Christine Jardine:** Thank you both. I am very interested in what you have been saying so far. Can I just check something? I did not quite pick up what you said on the percentage of people who would rank Scotland highly. Was it 16% or 60%?

Reuben Aitken: It is 15.8%, so 16%. I would love to have it at 60%.

Christine Jardine: Wouldn't we all?

Reuben Aitken: In a few years, maybe.

Q139 **Christine Jardine:** Maybe. I notice the words you seem to use most often when you are speaking are "collaborative", "collaboratively", "joined up" and "together". Do you think that, not just for Scotland, but presumably for the other devolved areas, the possibility of that joined-up thinking and approach through the embassies is central to what you do, rather than an add-on? By that, I mean you do not think, "Let's go and promote Scotland," and then think, "Oh, I wonder what the FCDO is thinking." From day one, it is about a joined-up, collaborative approach.

Reuben Aitken: I think it is a really good challenge. Our raison d'être is Scotland. That will always be our area of expertise and what we are here to promote and focus on, but of course my team in-market—Steve—can explain to you what the trends in Europe are, what the trends at the UK level are and how Scotland is an integral part of that economic landscape and of that agenda in terms of regulation, trade or investment. Understanding the context is something that all my folks domestically and in-market definitely have to do and do really effectively. I do think you are spot on in terms of how we need to ensure it is thought of in the FCDO systematically. As I was saying, I am focused on an inward investment win from a Scotland perspective, but the head of mission is focused on it as a win for the UK. Both of us can be really happy.

Dr Stephen Baker: I would like to give an example. As a base, you have to be able to do it yourself, so that is one thing. Immediately on top of that, you have to realise the synergy that can be gained by working together and the advantage of having that broader team working in tandem. That is where we are.

A real nice one was where we were looking to put a presentation together around renewable energy. The idea was, "We know what the UK presentation is. Can we have inputs from each of the devolveds?" We thought, "Well, let's step back from that. Let's have a session together where we work out what the UK pitch is and bring into that pitch each of the contributions from each of the regions." It so happens that my deputy in-market actually led that session. The other devolveds were really happy



with it. They all felt that their messages had been included. We ended with a UK pitch that went beyond policy and really went into the activities that were available on the ground for companies to consider.

Q140 Christine Jardine: That is very interesting. Also, I should have said at the very beginning that I have had experience of working with SDI and UKTI at the time when I was in the media and we were promoting independent companies. We were taking independent production companies to the United States and running trade missions there. What we did on the ground in Scotland was we worked with SDI, but it then put us in touch with the embassy. It worked through the consulate in New York, the embassy in Washington and the embassy in Canada. It almost felt like it was a tree. You went in through SDI and then it branched out. Is that a realistic metaphor for it? Does that describe it?

Reuben Aitken: That is a really effective metaphor. It is not just the embassy network that we then tap into; it is the academic community. There is GlobalScot. We have 1,200 GlobalScots across 60 markets. They are people who give up their time voluntarily to promote and support Scottish businesses. So there are fantastic connections even where my network of folks who are on the payroll does not reach. There are people we will reach out to. I can say, "Oh, we've got this media opportunity. Do you know someone?" and they will say, "No, but I'll open my black book and if I don't know someone, I'll find someone who can help." It is just fantastic to see people doing that for Scotland. It is all with a view to furthering our economic performance.

Q141 Christine Jardine: I want to ask about the new trade and investment hub in Edinburgh. How do you think its role is working? Is that sufficiently clear, and how would you like to see it working?

Reuben Aitken: From my point of view, there is plenty of trade and investment work to go round. If you doubled my team, I could get really good, valuable work for them. A lot of the economic performance comes from foreign direct investment and from our exports, so it's a vital bit of work. So, from my point of view, if DBT want to expand their footprint in Scotland, I have absolutely no issues with that. The critical thing is that it needs to be additional. We have had really good conversations with them—this is an example of it working quite well.

Before they think about what they are doing next, in terms of areas of focus as they have grown their small team, they have been saying, "Could you just be really clear with us on the trade side? Who is it you're working with? We're thinking of doing this." And I am saying to them, "Well, you would add a bit more value if you were to look at some of these early-stage companies, or some of my global footprint. We're not in all the markets that DBT is in, so actually, could you support companies into those markets, because you will have expertise that I and my guys don't have?"

I think the critical thing is that as that evolves and grows in maturity, we don't trip over each other and we're really clear about additionality, and



the way to do that is through candid exchange and working together. I think that's what businesses want. They just want there to be no wrong door, so that if they get in touch with DBT, and they say, "Actually, this is one for you guys, because you have the expertise and the know-how," they hand it over. Likewise, apart from Mexico, I have no one in Latin America, so if a company is coming to me and saying, "I want to expand into Brazil," or Colombia, I'm thinking, "Right, I've got some GlobalScots there I could help you tap up. Let's use the FCDO platform; let's use the DBT platform—let's use their networks." Make sure it's additional—that is the critical thing.

Q142 Christine Jardine: The word "collaboration" comes up again from what you are saying. In Scotland recently, there has been a lot of talk—a lot of speculation, a lot of controversy—about the development of embassy-like offices in other countries. You have talked about the danger, if you don't mind my saying so, of the departments tripping over one another in Scotland. Is that the danger with having separate organisations—separate offices that are not part of the UK embassy? Is there a danger of confusing people we might want to contact abroad?

Reuben Aitken: There is always a risk of confusion when you have multiple bodies. From my experience of talking to the team, the Scotland offering is normally pretty clear and crisp where we are off-platform. We are off-platform for a specific reason, so we will have been in Houston for a very specific reason and will maybe not have been on the FCDO platform there because it made sense to be right in with the industry in that space.

Christine Jardine: Yes, specifically—

Reuben Aitken: Or the situation could be similar in Germany, potentially. Collaboration, as you say, is a motif, but trade and investment is a competitive sport, so we are collaborating to enable competition. With our businesses, we get them together so that they collaborate to compete; it's very competitive. Is there a risk of us being disjointed or dislocated when we are not on the same footprint? I don't think so. Are there advantages from being on the same footprint? Yes, we can definitely harness those. Are there some downsides as well? Yes, sometimes, because it dilutes the Scotland-ness of some of our offer—"Scotland-ness" isn't a good word.

Christine Jardine: Scottishness.

Reuben Aitken: Yes, Scottishness. Steve has actually moved from being off the FCDO platform to being on the platform.

Dr Stephen Baker: I will just make a quick remark on that.

Q143 Christine Jardine: What advantages do you find?

Dr Stephen Baker: First, if I compare off versus on, when we were off the platform, we had a really good showcase office. It was designed well. We had a nice place to bring clients into or let companies use. It had very much a Scottish flavour. And it became very well known. We lost



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something of that in moving to the embassy platform. The embassy itself, in Tokyo, is very famous, but we lost some of that.

However, when I look at the way we were working with the embassy, we had good relations off the platform, but I think we have really good relations now that we are on the platform. It is just so different to be walking down the corridor and somebody stops you and says, "By the way, I just heard such and such." There is a different level of communication. It is not just working with the usual suspects like DBT; it is all the parts of the embassy. Whether it is starting from the ambassador, the consulate section, the political section or the economic section, they all have something to offer to support us in the work we do.

The other big thing is that once we are on the platform, all the issues of administration and HR just go away. We have excellent support around those areas. Where I had to be personally worried about liaising with an office in Tokyo to do all our salary-related issues and there was lots of documentation to be done, I can focus properly on my role now. That is the balance of off and on. In the main, I would say it is very positive to move down to the platform in our situation.

Chair: Have you finished, Christine?

Christine Jardine: Yes, thank you.

Chair: I was waiting for the gesture there, but I picked up the vibes.

Q144 **Deidre Brock:** I have a very quick question on the back of your previous comments. Are you suggesting there are concerns among embassies or other Government representatives that you might favour one of the devolved nations over the other, and that that could cause embarrassment, or that they would be worried about Scotland, for example, winning out on something and the other devolved nations not?

I am interested in this. Obviously, a hub that is focused solely on promoting Scotland seems to me to be preferable to one that is having to spread its concerns around the four nations. I am interested to hear how that works and what your thoughts are.

Reuben Aitken: This is one of the points that you were making, Steve. There is something around getting folks really comfortable with using the Scottish brand, for instance. It is something that we use the whole time; it has got real cut-through. The Chair mentioned the food and drink industry and the premium that that attracts, so I think there are a load of things we can do around this.

I know that some embassies will be thinking, "Can we use the Scottish branding on this? Shouldn't we just be using the GREAT branding and all that sort of agenda?" I think there are some practicalities—and some nervousness, at times—around people not really understanding the substance of devolution, and so perhaps thinking that the easiest thing is to check back with capital.



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I have been in post nearly five months now, so I always ask the team, "Give me some examples of what it is like and how the operation works when you are together and when you are separate". They say, "Sometimes what happens is there is an opportunity, and we say, 'Fantastic. We know all about this bit', but actually a load of the things they want to talk about are reserved."

There will be some things reserved to UK policy—contracts for difference or something like that—but they also want to talk about planning and a particular site in Scotland. They say, "Okay, we'll go", and we say, "Can you come with us and talk about the other bit?" and they say, "I just need to check back with capital that it's all right and with HQ that this is one for us to get involved in." That just needs to go. We cannot have people needing to check whether they can chase an opportunity for a win for Scotland. Steve, you might want to talk a bit more around this.

Dr Stephen Baker: I think there has been a movement. I have been in Japan since 1985, but only since 2006 have I been with SDI. In that, I have seen a movement in terms of how the embassy has overall related to the devolveds.

First of all, there was the collection and bringing of people more on to the platform. There has then been a real move to be more inclusive so that everybody was involved across the platform. I think it has just been that natural evolution that now, instead of doing everything yourself—let's say it was DBT just doing everything themselves—they have got to have that ability to work with a broader group.

What we are seeing is that it is all being worked through. Yes, I think there is this issue that we have got to be fair, but actually the issue from the devolveds we do not see as such a big issue.

Q145 **Deidre Brock:** Really? I was going to ask, actually, how you work with the other devolved nations, in terms of presenting your offer, and how that actually works on the ground. It would be interesting to hear about that.

Reuben Aitken: Steve, you might want to talk about how it is on the ground. Working with partners right across Government in the embassy is something that folks are very used to doing in-market. One thing that we have to be crystal clear about is where Scotland really has world-leading competitive advantage—you know, a comparative advantage that we can sell. We are quite happy if there are opportunities that others have got that are not in our sweet spot; that is okay.

I want to be selling, and if there is collateral being put together, and all the opportunities happen to be in Scotland because it is something that we are really good at, well, brilliant, and I don't think the Welsh or the Northern Irish, or other regions, should bother, in terms of kind of getting het up about that. But, similarly, at the same time, there will be examples of opportunities that are bespoke to particular areas, and we have to say,



“Well, we’re not world-beating in that technology or sector—absolutely fine; crack on.”

Dr Stephen Baker: My comments may be coloured by my experience with Asia. Asia is a very vibrant area. We’ve got some of the largest economies based in Asia. If people are thinking of investing or doing activity in Asia, then they’re thinking Asia. Then they’re thinking Asia again. Then it’s the US, then maybe Europe. So, this concerted effort to grab the attention of companies and get them to see the opportunity that exists in Europe, in the UK, and then showcase within that the specific things about why they should be engaged with Scotland—I think that overall process has real value there.

Chair: Ms Jardine, did you want to come in?

Q146 **Christine Jardine:** I was just interested in something that Dr Baker said. You said that you’d been in Asia since 1985, and you had seen the perception of Scottish industry, and so on, change rapidly in that time. I am just thinking that 1985 was pre devolution, so there wasn’t really the same network of devolved—

Dr Stephen Baker: There wasn’t.

Christine Jardine: There wasn’t. So, in a way, what I am taking from what you are saying—I am just checking that I am taking the right thing—is that you have actually seen the evidence of devolution working for Scotland in trade and industry. Through the work that you have been doing, you have seen that understanding of Scottishness and what Scotland has to offer, in the space industry, particularly. You have seen that organisations such as your own have grown and developed over the past 24 years. Would that be accurate?

Reuben Aitken: I think we are always going to say that we think that we add a huge amount of value, and I think our partners across Government would tend to agree. They love talking to my folks because they can bring it to life with real examples. It is not a sort of high-level—well, we’ve got some high-level strategy documents that the Scottish Government produces, but it’s granular and it’s real, and we can talk to you about the site because we’ve walked around it and we know where it is. We can say, “Right, that harbour isn’t deep enough, in terms of the draft. Right, you need to be in this one.” We understand the industry.

People say Scotland can be a small place at times, but, actually, there is a real strategic value in that it is concentrated, so we can get industry around the table to capitalise on an opportunity, or to at least quickly accelerate whether that opportunity could land in Scotland, from an inward investment side.

Q147 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. I just want to look a bit at the Scottish businesses, their exporting and their knowledge of exporting. It was noted in an evidence session in November, by the Scotland Office, that only 5% of Scottish companies export. When you look at Scotland’s proportion of population, which is 8% of the UK population, that 5% of



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companies that export does not reflect the population in Scotland. Do you think that is the case, and, if so, why?

Reuben Aitken: There are two slightly conflicting data sets that we sometimes have to disaggregate between the UK Government's stats and our stats. If any of the stats that are used don't stack up, it might be because of that. Some of us exclude oil and gas because it is quite cyclical, while some of us don't.

Do we need to do more to promote Scottish companies to export? Yes. Do we want to get to this target of 25% of GDP coming from exports? 100%. Are we there yet? No, but that is what we are critically focused on. We have had some headwinds. Brexit has made some of this quite challenging and we have had the pandemic, so there have been interruptions to our supply chains. We have examples of Scottish companies that are absolutely punching above their weight and performing exceptionally well in the export sphere.

Is there more to do? Yes. We are focusing on those 1,200 and raising ambitions and awareness of markets. That is what the trade team is all about: it is taking people to new markets or taking new products and services to markets that people are already in. We do that through trade missions and sometimes through one-on-one coaching with smaller companies. We develop companies' ambition and ability to pitch in market, and that delivers serious returns.

The export performance that we supported in 2021-22 was, I think, £1.4 billion of projected sales over the next three years, which is significant. The indicator that we look at is percentage of GDP. It is about 20% or 21% at the moment, and I want to get it up to 25% over the next few years. It is always a work in progress, I guess.

Q148 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Thank you. Dr Baker, did you want to add anything to that?

Dr Stephen Baker: Only one thing. There are a lot of smaller companies in Scotland. When we look at that 5%, I wonder whether we need to take into account the fact that not all of those smaller companies, which provide a very rich tapestry of expertise and are very agile in responding to conditions in Scotland and creating an economic impact, are focused on international trade.

Q149 **Sally-Ann Hart:** They could be if they knew where to find the support from Government.

Reuben Aitken: That is one of the areas of focus with "A Trading Nation". We are saying, "We haven't got enough resource to help everyone as much as we would like, so we're going to have to cut our cloth. Let's work with some of the companies that are slightly further up that value chain, and get them to export more and increase their market share." We still have a one-to-many offering, but it is one of those things where you could end up using all your resource trying to help early-stage companies. Even if they double in size, they employ two, four or 10 people, and their



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turnover hasn't dramatically increased. We are cutting our cloth a bit according to where we think we can deliver the biggest return on investment. That has been focusing on those 1,200, and spotting companies with real high-growth potential too. We are trying to back those two horses, but are not doing everything because we can't.

Q150 Sally-Ann Hart: Can I clarify what you are saying? To focus on the 1,200 companies that can increase their exports is one thing, but are you saying that we need more resources in order for more companies to increase exports? Obviously, increasing exports grows our economy and provides jobs. Is that what you are saying?

Reuben Aitken: Yes. The 1,200 includes some companies that aren't there in terms of having the export performance that we would like, but they are global by birth, so naturally there are very few barriers to them being able to export. They have high-growth sectors that they can lean into and grow. For most of the companies we are working with, it is about getting them into more markets, and getting more product lines and service opportunities into the same market or more markets.

If I had a bigger team, I would certainly be looking at doing more of that early-stage work, where you work with companies to feed the pipeline of the ones that are going to become the export champions of tomorrow. I have talked to DBT about their footprint and said, "If I had a bit more resource, this is where I would be focusing. Please focus some of your resource on that early-stage company piece, which can then feed the pipeline for the ones we are working with in 'A Trading Nation'."

Q151 Sally-Ann Hart: Just looking at the UK Government targets for 2030 and the Scottish Government targets for 2029, based on what you are focused on and what is happening now, do you think both Governments will be able to reach their export targets, or do you need to do more? Collectively, do we need to do more?

Reuben Aitken: My focus is always going to be biased on this, but I think trade and investment are absolute cornerstones of the productivity of this economy. Should we be doing more? I think we could do more with more resource. Having said that, I know it is a really hard-fought budget line that the Scottish Government have sought to protect. We also generate some of our income by investing in companies in Scottish Enterprise, but I think it is one of those things where if we had more resource we could do more.

As I was saying earlier, it is a competitive sport. On the inward investment side, there are other competitors out there who are desperately trying to attract opportunities to their countries. Could we do more with a bigger team? Yes. Are those targets challenging? Completely, yes. Do I think we can hit them? I am always optimistic, and the team is really ambitious, so I am hopeful, but it is going to be touch and go because the targets are really challenging.

Q152 Sally-Ann Hart: Looking at businesses' awareness of the community of support, we know there is a lot of Government support, including UK



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Export Finance, the online apps—“Made in the UK, Sold to the World” or whatever it is—and the Scottish Government’s “A Trading Nation” strategy. Do you think there is confusion for businesses in Scotland as to where they can find support, since there is both UK Government support and Scottish Government support? Is it that they just do not know where to find the support?

Reuben Aitken: The landscape could be seen as quite cluttered. There is the really clear tool of Find Business Support, which signposts you to any form of Scottish support. That should declutter the landscape, and it is quite easy to navigate. It was actually launched during the pandemic. But to be honest, businesses almost do not care where the support comes from. They just want access to it. Once they are in touch with us, it tends to be okay, and if we can help them then we help them. In practical terms, I am not sure it is that confusing.

Chair: I am conscious of time, as we have the Cabinet Secretary coming in, so very quick questions and answers, please.

Q153 **Deidre Brock:** Oil and gas figures are excluded from some of the export figures. Why is that?

Reuben Aitken: It is about how much we affect it. Sometimes in commodity trading the oil price will do something, as we have seen, and then oil exports will increase radically. If my team and I then put our feet up and say, “Well, we’ve met this year’s targets. We can all take a break for this year now”, that would not be appropriate. We try to exclude it sometimes—just because of the cyclical nature of some of it and how much we feel we drive the value. What we really focus on is our additionality and how we drive return on investment of every single hour that the team put in.

Q154 **Deidre Brock:** Does the Scotland Office figure saying that 5% of Scottish companies export sound about right to you, despite us being 8% of the UK population?

Reuben Aitken: I don’t have it to hand, but there is a large tail of SMEs that are very small, and most of those businesses are one-man bands. They do not necessarily have the appetite or the credentials to be exporters at this stage. There are a lot of small-scale companies in that space.

Q155 **Dr Whitford:** Just to clarify, that came from a statement from Lord Offord that only 5% export, which is below the Scottish population of 8%. Basing it on the Scottish population, the question would be: what percentage of UK companies that export are Scottish? Those two things are disconnected. The percentage of UK exporters that are Scottish companies is what should match 8%, instead of saying that it is 5% of Scottish companies that export. Do you happen to know where we are with that? Are we punching to our weight within the UK or not?

Reuben Aitken: I do not want to quote figures without knowing the source of the 5%. I could write a quick note to the Committee afterwards.



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Dr Whitford: That would be great, because I could not find a source for the 5% figure at the time to clarify, and those two things do not match.

Chair: As you can tell, the Committee is quite exercised about this 5% figure.

Dr Whitford: Even if it is 5%, it is irrelevant to the population. We want to know about the percentage of UK companies that are Scottish.

Chair: If you have anything you can help us with, it would be gratefully received. Thank you. I know this has been a very short session, but it has been fantastic and very informative. We are grateful for your time. Obviously, you will be observing our ongoing inquiry with deep interest. Please get in touch with anything else you feel could help us. We will now have a short adjournment until we get our next guests in. Thank you for your attendance this afternoon.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Angus Robertson and Scott Wightman.

Q156 **Chair:** Welcome back to the Scottish Affairs Committee and our ongoing inquiry into promoting Scotland internationally. We are delighted to be joined by the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, which is a rather large portfolio. I will let him introduce himself and give anything by way of a short introductory statement. If you don't mind, Cabinet Secretary, perhaps you could introduce your colleague as well.

Angus Robertson: I am delighted to be here, and to be joined by Scott Wightman, who is head of the External Affairs Directorate of the Scottish Government. Scott has a long and distinguished track record as a British diplomat. Before his time in the Scottish Government, he served with the Foreign Office, including a stint as a UK ambassador.

I will start with some brief words of introduction. I thank you, Mr Wishart, as convenor, and I thank Committee members for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. I will try to keep my opening remarks short and to the point. I want to be clear from the outset about my and the Scottish Government's focus and purpose in engaging with this inquiry. Despite what some might think, we are well aware of what is reserved and what is devolved, and we perhaps have a better understanding and respect of those boundaries than others.

You will be aware that the Scottish Parliament carried out a similar inquiry last year, which focused on the work of the Scottish Government's international network. This Committee's inquiry has a different focus; it is looking at how the UK Government promotes Scottish interests internationally. Clearly, that is a reserved matter, but given the impact of that activity on devolved competences, and indeed on Scotland's economic, cultural and social wellbeing, it is a matter in which we all have an interest. It is on that basis that I was happy to come to the Committee to give evidence.



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Although the UK Government have a clear responsibility to promote Scottish interests around the world, I want to draw your attention to the excellent complementary work of the Scottish Government's own international network in representing and promoting Scotland internationally. This is a network that has served and been supported by a range of Administrations for more than two decades. It attracts investment and creates domestic opportunities and benefits for the people of Scotland, and I and other Scottish Ministers have had the privilege of witnessing the excellent work it does.

They are not, as some UK Government Ministers and newspapers would have us believe, somehow flying the flag for independence, although I have to say that the position of the Scottish Government on that issue is not exactly a secret. They advance Scotland's interests in the areas of devolved responsibility, including trade and investment, economic development, the transition to net zero, higher education, culture and promoting Scotland's global reputation.

I want to state my appreciation for the positive relations and support from the FCDO at post and in London in the vast majority of cases. I have seen at first hand many strong working relationships between Scottish and UK Government officials which have created excellent opportunities to showcase Scotland to our international partners and thereby promote wider UK interests. For example, I had the privilege of an excellent discussion with the then relatively newly appointed UK ambassador to China just last year; I had a breakfast meeting with the UK ambassador to Norway to during my visit there in February. So if my remaining remarks are critical, I want to recognise the genuine efforts of many UK representatives overseas to promote Scottish interests.

On more than one occasion, the Scottish identity has frequently been diluted as part of a UK offering, with Scotland's distinctive brand not always promoted strongly or systematically. If I may, Mr Wishart, I would like to give two examples, both illustrating a different dimension. The first is the St Andrew's day celebrations in Paris last November. St Andrew's day and Burns night are key moments in the calendar to promote trade and investment opportunities in Scotland, as well as our cultural and educational strengths. In full awareness that the Scottish Government were, with FCDO colleagues, organising a joint St Andrew's day event to promote premium food and drink production from Scotland in the residence of the British ambassador in Paris, to be hosted by a Scottish Government Minister, the Scottish Office insisted on hosting its own much smaller event at the residence on the same day. My officials were forced to move our joint event with the embassy to accommodate the Secretary of State for Scotland. It risked reputational damage not only for our joint event, but for collectively the British embassy and the many Scottish businesses our event was designed to support. The only body politicising the event was the Scotland Office, whose actions are distinctively political, demonstrating a small-minded determination to score constitutional points rather than advocating for or supporting Scotland, and thereby the UK internationally.



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Secondly, for purely political reasons, Lord Offord, the junior Minister in the Scotland Office, revealed private comments he claimed had been made by the Icelandic Prime Minister about Scotland. Such conduct undermines Scotland's interests and our international reputation. It is undiplomatic and it is impolite.

This suggests to me that there is an emerging pattern of active undermining of Scottish interests overseas in the pursuit of a rather transparent and narrow-minded political agenda. Despite the genuine efforts of many FCDO officials around the globe, the evidence your Committee has received from such bodies as NFU Scotland, Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the Scotch Whisky Association indicates that the UK Government currently do not do enough to promote Scottish interests and our distinct strengths. It also suggests that it would not take much to put this right, though, of course, I can think of a much better way in the long term of doing just that.

In conclusion, Mr Convenor, in trying to constrain the Scottish Government's international activities, this UK Government are actively undermining the interests of Scotland's people, community and businesses. If they truly want to promote Scotland internationally, they need instead to start listening to the views of the Scottish Government, which will open the way to more effective collaboration to benefit our businesses, people and communities—an aim I hope we might all share. I look forward to discussing this with Members in greater detail. Thank you very much.

Q157 Chair: Thank you for that introductory statement. It does not strike me that the state of affairs is a particularly harmonious relationship between the Scottish Government and the FCDO when it comes to promoting Scotland internationally. You have given two examples that I think greatly trouble this Committee in terms of how this—

Douglas Ross: Troubles you, Chair. You don't speak on behalf of the Committee.

Chair: You will have your opportunity—

Douglas Ross: Just so long as that is minuted.

Chair: You will have your opportunity in a minute, Douglas. I am just wondering what could be done to improve the relationship between the UK and Scottish Governments, and is there anything you have observed of a co-operative and consensual working arrangement, where Scotland's interests are being promoted in a way that you, as the man responsible for this in Scotland, think is working well?

Angus Robertson: The first thing to say is that I was trying to draw a distinction between an often very positive impression working with the FCDO and the unfortunate examples I have given in relation to the Scotland Office. They are two different Departments.



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On the Foreign Office front, I would just observe that colleagues there are clearly thoughtful and are trying to work out how they can deliver on their mandate to promote the United Kingdom in all of its differentiated ways. My experience is that some ambassadors and some missions are very seized of this. They are trying to work out how to be imaginative, how to host events, and how to reflect the fact that there are different Governments in the United Kingdom and they have, on some issues, different perspectives. There are other ambassadors and other missions where that is less of a consideration, so if there is a reflection that I would make, it is that there is a lack of consistency on that.

Q158 Chair: Is this all down to the individual ambassador or high commissioner in the different high commissions and embassies across the world?

Angus Robertson: A lot of this revolves around people, because I imagine that the Foreign Office asks its missions to try to promote the entire United Kingdom and to work with the different Administrations across the UK. But I think that, for some, there is almost a sense of, "Oh, that's something that the Scottish Government should do." Where there are Scottish Government officers—they are largely based in British embassies—that can work very well, but, whether it is out of sight and out of mind or it is a more considered omission, there are quite significant examples of things operating in a disadvantageous way.

To give a concrete example of that, as everybody around the table here understands, education is devolved, so it was a surprise to us when the Foreign Office signed an agreement with Germany about educational co-operation for the United Kingdom—an agreement that has involved, in its partners, German organisations, including the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder of the Federal Republic and, further to that, representatives from the Länder themselves. In sitting down and discussing educational co-operation, which I would have thought we all think is a tremendously good thing, the German partners were sitting there saying, "We have a federal system, which involves issues that are decided on at a devolved level"—the Länder—but their interlocutors from the Foreign Office at no point saw fit to integrate in their thinking that it is the same in the United Kingdom and that education is decided on by Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There was no involvement of Scottish Government officials in the Berlin embassy in developing this, and the first sight that the Scottish Government received of this agreement, which has an impact on Scottish education, was on the day before it was published.

I am very keen to put on record that there are plenty of examples that I can think of where there are people who are thoughtful and considerate, and who wish to try to have a very direct and fruitful relationship promoting Scottish interests. Unfortunately, there are plenty of examples where, whether by commission or omission, they do not.

Q159 Chair: We will hear from the UK Government, who, obviously, will tell us how they see this particular relationship getting along, but we heard from Lord Offord recently that his concern was that the SNP Administration



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had been encroaching on reserved matters in its foreign engagement. He went on to say that this would be “very closely monitored” by UK Ministers going forward. Are you familiar with that statement, and does this happen?

Angus Robertson: It bemuses me somewhat, because I would have thought that anybody who knows anything about the way that Scottish Government Ministers operate internationally knows that—for example, whenever I meet Ministers in other countries, I am always accompanied by a representative of the local British embassy. That then leads to reporting to the Foreign Office, which means the Foreign Office knows exactly what is discussed, so I am not really sure what Lord Offord is saying.

Q160 **Chair:** I think he was referring to meetings between Scottish Ministers and officials of other embassies or other nations, and the idea that independence would be put on the agenda for conversations and discussion with—

Angus Robertson: We have never put independence on any agenda in any meeting that we have held internationally. I have really enjoyed the interaction that I have had with—I know, for example, that Lord Offord has talked about discussions that he had in Iceland, which followed me meeting the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister there. They were hugely productive meetings, because, as you and others will be aware, we are working really hard to try to develop Scotland’s renewable and hydrogen offering, and I think there is a tremendous opportunity for co-operation right across northern Europe. This is known and understood by the Foreign Office. I have met the Foreign Secretary about this and he has agreed that there is tremendous potential in working together. This is one of those examples where my direct relations with the Foreign Office are really good. I am mystified as to why the Scotland Office has got itself wound up about things.

Q161 **Chair:** Just to clarify, is there always a British diplomat present when you have conversations?

Angus Robertson: All of my ministerial meetings that I have had with a Minister internationally since becoming Cabinet Secretary have always been accompanied by a UK embassy official.

Q162 **Chair:** Have any objections ever been raised about the type of conversations that you have been trying to initiate with any of these officials?

Angus Robertson: No.

Q163 **Chair:** Lastly from me, how well are we—the Scottish Government and the UK Government—doing in ensuring that Scotland is being promoted internationally, notwithstanding some of the issues and examples you raised? Are we doing well enough in making sure that Scotland is promoted?



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Angus Robertson: I am always ambitious about trying to ensure that we use every opportunity in every location, but cost is a factor for everybody, whether that is the United Kingdom with its embassy network or the Scottish Government with their much-limited network of Government officers, which I have already mentioned, who are mostly in British embassies. You will always think that there are more locations where you are not currently located in which one could promote Scottish interests.

I should say—it's obvious to you, as you have had SDI colleagues give evidence—that there are a number of different networks that promote Scotland internationally. There is the Scottish Government office network and the SDI network, and we have GlobalScot and trade envoys in a number of locations. But this is significantly smaller than most sovereign states. We have opened an office in Copenhagen. That is a very good thing in order to cover the Nordic region. We aim to open a Scottish Government office in Warsaw, again to promote our interests in central Europe. But you could ask yourself why there are not Scottish Government offices in other capitals, markets and growth areas. I would love to see that potential develop. One of the great things about being able to see at first hand what people are doing to promote Scotland internationally is that we can see that they do a great job. I am very confident that if our network were larger—as we are smaller than other comparative networks—that would bring advantages as well.

There are things we can do in our own networks to ensure that we are getting maximum value out of them. I think we are very, very fortunate to have more than 1,000 people around the world in the GlobalScot network who are keen to help and be supportive by promoting Scotland in different ways. We need to constantly reflect on how we do things, whether there is more we can do and how we can do that, and then deliver on it.

Q164 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Good afternoon to you both. The United Kingdom is quite hot on soft power, and given Scotland's unique landscape—the universities up there, the whisky and all the stuff Scotland has to offer—do you think the Scottish and UK Governments could better utilise Scotland's unique identity and existing soft power assets to better promote Scotland internationally? If so, how could that be done?

Angus Robertson: I am not sure we have enough time to answer that question fully. On the unique identity point, you are absolutely right. There is much that can be done to promote Scotland's identity. I am hugely impressed and proud of the Brand Scotland campaign. I don't know if the Committee has had a chance to look at the latest promotion that is under way, but it manages to do two things that are quite important really well. It manages not to shy away from the things that Scotland is known for and liked, which tend to be associated with traditional images of Scotland, and at the same time, it reflects a newer, more contemporary sense of what Scotland is all about.

Here is where Scotland's offer in this respect is—I can't say unique, but I am not aware of any other examples of this. We literally have—across all our agencies with a responsibility for trade promotion, tourism promotion,



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inward investment, and and and and—a cross-cutting, promotional effort to try and give a unified sense of Scotland as a brand, doing both of those things. Are we trying to promote both a traditional and contemporary sense of where Scotland is? Absolutely. Is that something that we see internationally everywhere where United Kingdom embassies and so on are present? No, that's not always the case. There is a GREAT Britain campaign that the UK Government deploys, sometimes to the extent that there is absolutely no visibility for the Brand Scotland campaigns that promote Scotland.

Your point was about unique identity. Sometimes there are examples where that unique identity is not visible at all. So yes, there is more that can be done to make sure that at international events, there can be an incorporation of both, if there is a UK stand and so on—why not?

On the wider soft power, there are huge opportunities. The Scottish Government has recently launched an consultation on our international cultural work, because we have amazing cultural organisations that tour and go to different parts of the world. They represent Scotland as well, and there is a question about how we can best co-ordinate their efforts and our wider promotional efforts when they are in different parts of the world.

Is there more that can be done? Absolutely. I have put on record my appreciation for the new UK ambassador to China coming to discuss, from the Scottish Government's point of view, what our needs, interests, concerns and expectations are, many of which, incidentally, are shared. It was good to have a follow-up meeting with the head of China policy for the Foreign Office. You have a really good example there of a very proactive ambassador and a very proactive part of the FCDO recognising that there is a good reason to be working with the Scottish Government. That is an example of really good working practice. If other ambassadors, embassies and other parts of the Foreign Office wanted to come along and say, "Where can we do more?", I would be happy to say, "Let's meet and talk about that. Let's see if there are ways of being able to do that."

Similarly, by extension, this is not just about the FCDO. Obviously, the British Council plays quite an important role, when we are talking about soft power—looking at culture, education and other things—to make sure that we have a good working relationship. I meet the British Council regularly. We co-sponsor events such as the Edinburgh culture summit together with the UK Government—another example of something working well. If there's a will, there's a way—I suppose that is my answer to you. There is more that can be done, if there is a willingness to, and I am very keen to do that.

Q165 Sally-Ann Hart: Mr Wightman, I will ask you a question because your background has been in the diplomatic service, and you have experience of working in embassies abroad and looking at Britain's soft power. How much do you think Scotland contributes to that? Obviously, when we are looking at the UK Government with Scottish interests in this, is it something that is mutually beneficial to both the UK and Scotland?



Scott Wightman: I would say that Scotland adds quite a lot to the UK's brand. The latest brand index run by Anholt has indicated that among 50 or 60-odd countries, Scotland now ranks 15th for international recognition of its brand, which, for a sub-state actor, is a really impressive performance.

Q166 **Sally-Ann Hart:** What is it about Scotland? Is it the universities?

Scott Wightman: There are different components. As the Cabinet Secretary said, there are the traditional elements of Scotland that are recognised. It is recognised as being a very welcoming place. It is recognised for its distinct culture.

Across all the various categories, Scotland did pretty well. The areas where there was scope for further improvement were around recognition of Scotland's strengths in science and innovation. Again, that perhaps speaks to some of the evidence that you have heard; maybe there is too much emphasis placed on those traditional elements of tartan, whisky, golf or whatever it might be, and sufficient attention is not given to how you can leverage those to get across really punchy messages about the nature of contemporary Scotland and its strengths, particularly in areas such as its universities.

Sally-Ann Hart: Looking at promoting Scottish interests within our international network, whether through the British Council or our embassies, you mentioned, Mr Robertson, that in Paris recently, there was a lack of collaboration between the UK Government or the actors you mentioned there and what you were doing. Should there be more collaboration, and should there be less focus on—let's say—St Andrew's day? We have discussed how important it is to really push Scottish interests, whether it is St Andrew's day or Burns night. Is that focusing too much on the traditional things that Scotland is known for, such as haggis, whisky, cashmere, landscape and everything else? Should there be less focus on that now, because that is focusing on the traditional, or do we still need to do that in order to use it as a platform for the other stuff that Scotland wants to become internationally renowned for?

Angus Robertson: I do not think it is either/or. If this was a Committee of the Oireachtas in Dublin, one would never consider downgrading what the Irish Government's diplomatic network does around St Patrick's day. They literally dispatch every single Government Minister around the world to use the platform of that annual event to get the great and the good—whichever country they are in—to attend. I was at the recent St Patrick's day event in Edinburgh, which was hugely well attended. But that would only be part of the consular or diplomatic effort of the Irish foreign service.

On your point, it seems to me to be de minimis—it has to be said that this was not always a given in the past—that we should, in post, always be using opportunities to use identifiable days, whether that is St Andrew's day or Burns day. But there are so many other things that can be used as well, so I am loth to take the either/or challenge, because I do not think it is that. It seems to me to be absolutely de minimis that one should use



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the things that one is known for and that are good pegs to get people along to things.

A really good example of that is the Burns reception that was held by the Scottish Government office in Brussels this January. The attendance list was absolutely remarkable. Where was it held? In the residence of the British ambassador. It is an example where, if you have good working relations and are prepared to use dates, events and initiatives to hang your hat on to promote different things, you can do as much of that as you should, but you are right to say that you need to reflect both the traditional and the contemporary. If you get the mix right, I think you are in the right place.

Q167 Sally-Ann Hart: Mr Wightman, from your experience of working in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, do you think that the Foreign Office should seek to establish a more consistent and regular calendar of events across British embassies to promote Scotland overseas, as well as Scottish produce, tourism, and the other soft power stuff and all the other goods and things that Scotland is known for? If there is not one already, should there be proper strategic oversight about planning across the network on Scottish calendar events?

Scott Wightman: It is hard to invent hooks artificially. Tartan Week in north America is an additional opportunity, and certainly our office in the embassy in Washington is putting a lot of effort into organising some very contemporary-focused events in New York to coincide with that. More important than the approach that you are suggesting is to enhance the understanding, across the board, in missions overseas of the nature and the strengths of contemporary Scotland so that those can then be woven into other activities, some of which might be Scotland-specific, but some of which might be more general.

Chair: On the Anholt index, Scotland has gone up from 17 to 15, and we actually beat Ireland, which is No. 18. I think that is something to note and to be proud of. It reflects well on the branding of Scotland.

Q168 Douglas Ross: Good afternoon, Mr Wightman and Mr Robertson. Mr Robertson, international Governments will clearly be interested in the government of Scotland. It is currently run by the SNP, which is going through a very interesting leadership battle. Yesterday, your party president and chief executive said the party was in "a tremendous mess". Today, Nicola Sturgeon said, "The SNP is not in a mess." Who do you agree with?

Chair: Order. We are here to discuss promoting Scotland internationally. The internal arrangements of the Scottish National party are not relevant to that. Could you please ask a question that is related to our inquiry?

Douglas Ross: I will rephrase my question. You will have to advise ambassadors and others from international countries about the political situation in Scotland. When you are doing that, would you agree with Nicola Sturgeon, who says that the current governing party of Scotland "is not in a mess", or with the chief executive of the SNP, who says it is in



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"a tremendous mess"?

Angus Robertson: I am just going to take a note of "you will have to advise foreign Governments". I have not spoken to any foreign Governments about—

Q169 **Douglas Ross:** Who do you agree with, though?

Angus Robertson: I think the Scottish National party is going through a leadership contest, where different people have different things to say. There is plenty that could be said about that, but I am not sure what that has to do with the United Kingdom Government's promotion—

Chair: Order. It has absolutely nothing to do with promoting Scotland internationally. We have had an answer; now can we please move on? We have precious little time with the Cabinet Secretary, and we are trying to find out what their view is about Scotland being promoted internationally. Can we please stick to that?

Q170 **Douglas Ross:** I rephrased my question twice, and I think it is a relevant question. If the Cabinet Secretary is unwilling to answer, I think people will reach their own conclusions about your chairing of that part of this session.

Mr Robertson, you are commonly referred to in the Scottish media as "airmiles Angus". Do you think the amount of international travel that you do, and the cost to the Scottish taxpayer, is seen as a priority when there are many other issues that the Government should be focusing on and putting very valuable taxpayers' money towards?

Angus Robertson: I see the promotion of Scotland internationally as a matter that creates jobs, that creates investment, and that supports and promotes tourism and culture. I and my office decline more invitations to attend international events than I accept. Do I think that the travel that I and other Scottish Government Ministers undertake in pursuit of the promotion of all those advantageous elements that a Government is supposed to deliver on is a good thing? I think we provide good value for that. There are a great many more things that I could visit and places that I could go than I have yet been to. My job description is Cabinet Secretary for External Affairs, and the clue is in the name. My job is to promote Scotland internationally, and that is exactly what I am going to do.

Q171 **Douglas Ross:** That is what your job description says. My question was: what do you think is the perception of your constituents in Edinburgh Central, and mine in the Highlands and Islands, about that being the focus, and about taxpayers' money going on that, when there are critical issues that your Government is seeking to deal with—challenges in the NHS, education and so on?

Angus Robertson: I am sure that if they did not want me to do that, they would not have elected me in an SNP gain from—

Q172 **Douglas Ross:** They did not elect you—

Angus Robertson: May I finish answering the question?



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Douglas Ross: Not if we are going to mislead, because he was not elected in that position—

Chair: Order. How this works is that you ask a question, and we get an answer—

Douglas Ross: You don't let the questions be asked.

Chair: If you are not happy with an answer, you can ask your question again.

Q173 **Douglas Ross:** I will, thank you. If I can move on, Mr Robertson, you mentioned Minister Offord's comments about your meeting with the Icelandic Prime Minister. Did you or did you not speak about independence with the Icelandic Prime Minister?

Angus Robertson: She asked me about independence.

Q174 **Douglas Ross:** So you spoke about independence?

Angus Robertson: The Prime Minister of Iceland asked me about independence.

Q175 **Douglas Ross:** So you spoke about independence.

Angus Robertson: I answered her questions, yes.

Q176 **Douglas Ross:** Therefore, Minister Offord was correct in what he said about the discussions that you had had with international counterparts and Governments on Scottish independence. You said that you never put independence on the agenda, but that does not mean that you never speak about independence at these meetings.

Angus Robertson: I am very polite and I answer people's questions, Mr Ross, as I am trying to do to you.

Q177 **Douglas Ross:** I am just checking: when you said to this Committee that you never put independence on the agenda, that does not mean that you never speak about independence in these meetings?

Angus Robertson: If people are keen to ask me questions, I am always happy to answer, Mr Ross.

Q178 **Douglas Ross:** It would be interesting if you would answer about the current political state of Scotland, but we are not allowed to ask about that. So you can confirm that you did speak about independence with the Icelandic Prime Minister in the October meeting of the Arctic Circle?

Angus Robertson: I refer you to the answer that I gave a moment ago.

Q179 **Douglas Ross:** Just yes or no—it's easy.

Angus Robertson: I did say yes. I was asked a question and I answered it—which, as I have already mentioned, would be the subject of a report by the UK ambassador to Iceland, who was in the meeting with me.

Q180 **Douglas Ross:** I was just going to come on to that, because I noted down that in response to the Chair, you said that the ambassador or any



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other diplomat has never raised concerns about you speaking about independence in these meetings. But would you agree with me that diplomats would never do that? They tend to sit very poker-faced, as Mr Wightman is doing throughout this session, and would never interject in that way. It may come out in a read-out of that meeting following, but could you imagine a diplomat ever interjecting between two politicians in that way?

Angus Robertson: I do not think that is how it would work. If there was ever an issue that needed to be raised, I would never presume that a British diplomat would not choose a diplomatic way of making their views on the subject known—but they never had to.

Q181 **Douglas Ross:** On British diplomats, do you always refer to them as British diplomats or British ambassadors? Do you ever use colloquialisms when you are referring to them in these meetings?

Angus Robertson: What colloquialisms would those be?

Q182 **Douglas Ross:** I am just asking: would you ever call them anything other than the British diplomat, or the representatives of the British or the UK Government? Have you ever used any phrase other than that?

Angus Robertson: What would those be, Mr Ross?

Q183 **Douglas Ross:** I am asking you: have you ever used anything other than that?

Angus Robertson: I am not aware of what phrase you have in mind, Mr Ross.

Q184 **Douglas Ross:** The phrase I am asking you whether you use—do you always, 100%, refer to them as British ambassadors and British diplomats, or have you ever called them anything else?

Angus Robertson: I can recall a very good interaction I had with the French Europe Minister, with two colleagues from the British Embassy, where I was lauding and praising their abilities as British diplomats working in the British embassy to help and support British Ministers of the British Government, while at the same time doing so for Ministers of the Scottish Government and working to different ministerial directions. I think it was very clear then, and I think I am pretty clear in every other interaction that I have.

Q185 **Douglas Ross:** You would never call them the English diplomats?

Angus Robertson: No, I don't think so.

Q186 **Douglas Ross:** Never?

Angus Robertson: I don't think so.

Q187 **Douglas Ross:** I am just checking for this Committee—you would not mislead the Committee deliberately—that you have never called them the English diplomats.



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Angus Robertson: British diplomats, like British civil servants, are British diplomats or British civil servants.

Q188 **Douglas Ross:** You have never called them, in these meetings, the English diplomats?

Angus Robertson: I don't see why I would say that.

Q189 **Douglas Ross:** Yes or no to that question?

Angus Robertson: I have no recollection of ever saying such a thing, no.

Douglas Ross: You have never said it?

Chair: Can we please move on? He has answered that about three times.

Q190 **Douglas Ross:** He has not, actually. Have you ever used misleading statistics when you have been representing the Scottish Government abroad?

Angus Robertson: I think what Mr Ross is referring to are statistics that were used both by the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government in relation to renewable energy potential—

Q191 **Douglas Ross:** Have you ever used them when you knew they were wrong?

Angus Robertson: I have been extremely careful that when I have become completely aware that statistics are out of date—they have been updated and they are no longer the best statistics to use—those are statistics that I do not use and I should use the current statistics.

Douglas Ross: On a timeline, your Department was told on 6 September about a statistic—the 25% potential renewables from Europe—

Chair: Order.

Douglas Ross: Chair, I cannot believe you are going to stop a politician—

Chair: Order.

Douglas Ross: I cannot believe you are going to do this, Chair. This is incredible. If you are going to do what I think you are going to do, I wonder if you are following your duties as an impartial Chair of this House.

Chair: What I am trying to do is to conduct an inquiry into promoting Scotland internationally.

Douglas Ross: Let me ask some questions.

Chair: Unless you get to some point of conclusion—

Q192 **Douglas Ross:** I will. The conclusion is that, on 4 October, you spoke to Governments across Europe about a statistic, which you had been told on 6 September should not be used. Your Department then went back to say that the Cabinet Secretary had a specific ask to include that figure in a statement. They were told, minutes later, that, "we do not have the



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evidence to back up that statement and therefore we advise against using it." But you used it at subsequent meetings. Why was that?

Angus Robertson: Convenor, you will be aware—

Douglas Ross: Chair. Convenor is in the Scottish Parliament.

Chair: I am happy to be called anything. I want to ensure that everybody gets an opportunity to ask questions about promoting Scotland internationally. If you can answer that question as briefly and concisely as possible then we can move on to the inquiry.

Angus Robertson: This matter has already been the subject of a parliamentary statement in the Scottish Parliament and a significant number of written questions. I am happy to answer MSPs in the Scottish Parliament. I am here to give evidence today in relation to the promotion of Scotland by the United Kingdom Government. That is why I am here to give evidence, Mr Convenor.

Q193 **Douglas Ross:** I still have the floor at the moment, Mr Robertson. The question is over the statistics that you used when you were representing the Scottish Government abroad on Scotland's place internationally. Chair, if you are going to try to bring this matter to a close, it is important that we know about that timeline. Did you knowingly use a statistic, when discussing this with foreign Governments, that you had been told was wrong, that could not be proved and that you had been asked not to include? Yes or no?

Angus Robertson: Convenor, I refer to my previous answer, which is that this has been subject to a parliamentary statement and a large number of written answers and has absolutely nothing to do with the United Kingdom's promotion of Scotland internationally.

Douglas Ross: They did not get answers there either—

Chair: Order. Stop. We have also had a long discussion about this with another Scottish Government Minister when he was here, so can we now please move on to promoting Scotland internationally? If you have finished, we have three colleagues who have only half an hour with the Cabinet Secretary. Can we move on?

Q194 **Douglas Ross:** Well, compared with what you had at the start of this session, I still have time. This is really important. You said that you have given statements to the Scottish Parliament and answered questions about this. You will also be aware that the press has said, almost exclusively, that you refuse to answer. Why are you refusing to answer to this Committee as well?

Chair: Order. We have been through this. We have dealt with it.

Douglas Ross: We will have to discuss your chairing of this meeting as well.

Chair: Yes, we will have to have a discussion about that. Philippa



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Whitford?

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, before we move to Philippa Whitford, can we ask for it to be noted that, for the first time, the Chair has prevented Members from asking witnesses relevant questions to the inquiry and from getting answers. We will have to write to the witness about this to get his answers in writing.

Chair: We will indeed. Let us now move on to discussing promoting Scotland internationally, which I am sure Phillipa Whitford will now do.

Q195 **Dr Whitford:** Obviously, you will be aware that we have just heard from SDI that its advantage is a granular understanding of industrial sectors and specific businesses in Scotland. What additional benefits and expertise do the Scotland hubs bring—most of those hubs are in FCDO British embassies—to promoting Scotland overseas? Do they promote a closer working relationship in that country, between the FCDO in the British embassy and a Scotland hub—if that is literally in the same building or not far away?

Angus Robertson: I will let Scott Wightman talk about some of the more granular detail. My impression from going to different countries to see how this works—again, another example of why it is important to go to places to see how things work in practice—is that it is quite different in different countries because of the different markets.

A good example of that at the present time is that I am looking at the new hub in Copenhagen, which has a very particular interest in culture, for example. If we look at what has been possible in the screen and TV sector in Denmark, we will see that there is a lot for us to learn there.

In Germany, there is huge potential around hydrogen, around renewables. It is mission critical that we get the mixture right: we have SDI and its experts, who understand different sectors of the economy as their primary function, and a talented team in the British embassy, which are making sure that we foster the right relations with both the German Federal Government and the German Länder. We also have a British embassy post that realises that this is a major priority for us. Sometimes, that works really well, and, sometimes, it is not quite there yet. The UK in Germany, for example, is visibly promoting hydrogen in the north. From their point of view—much to the misunderstanding of the Germans, who think Scotland is in the north—they are not talking about the north of Britain; they are talking about the north of England.

There is still a way to go in some postings and in certain contexts, but I think having a mixture of DTI experts who understand different economic sectors working together where we have a Scottish Government office and where we have a British embassy or high commission that is forward leaning in trying to promote all this is hugely advantageous. Scott, is there anything you would like to add in terms of different geographies that might be relevant to understand the point I am making?



Scott Wightman: The nature of the conversations that SDI colleagues have with businesses is a bit different from those that Scottish Government officials would have. Scottish Government officials would be addressing questions, giving clarifications, explaining the policy and regulatory contexts and putting them in touch with Scottish Government officials or officials from other public agencies where particular investors want to understand more clearly what the framework is, so that they can work out both the regulatory risk and the political risk involved. Scottish Government officials would be better placed to have those sorts of conversations than SDI officials. That is the distinction I would draw.

Q196 **Dr Whitford:** Obviously, in Germany, there are SDIs in Dusseldorf, in Nordrhein-Westfalen—the big industrial Ruhr area—who are of course incredibly interested in hydrogen production from Scotland. Are you saying not just that it is in addition to FCDO colleagues in British embassies, but that there is a synergism by having SDI and Scottish Government officials within a hub? Obviously, there is more SDI around the world—

Scott Wightman: But in Germany, the relationship between the SDI team and the Scottish Government team working on the hydrogen issue is very, very close. It is essential.

The Scottish Government team is the one that has carved out the strategic opportunity in developing a really long-term relationship with Germany, both at a Government level and between the major German heavy industrial power companies and Scotland. SDI have been able to have those more detailed business conversations on the back of that. They have had more of a struggle in getting the FCDO colleagues on platform and the UK Government Departments, which will have an essential role to play in realising the opportunity. They have had more of a struggle in getting them to understand and act in a supportive way.

There is no question about it: the role of our office in Berlin has been fundamental in getting us to where we are.

Q197 **Dr Whitford:** I am the chair of the German all-party group, and it has been very striking that the Länder we were visiting last year was also visiting Scotland, whereas that would not necessarily have been the case in the past. Suddenly finding, as you were talking about, a modern sector and image of Scotland's potential has awakened an interest in particular—

Angus Robertson: Here is a really good example of how things actually work in practice. I was invited, as was the then Energy Minister, Greg Hands, to speak at the Ludwig-Erhard-Gipfel summit in Bavaria. Greg, who is a friend of mine—we are both German speakers—took to the stage to speak about the UK and energy, and he literally only spoke about the UK Government's perspective on energy. Obviously, he had the time and linguistic ability to explain that there are other priorities in different parts of the UK that are complementary, so an opportunity was missed there.



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Having said that, the advantage of being at the event was then meeting with other Länder representatives and, in this case, specifically the Bavarians. That then led to a Bavarian delegation coming to Scotland and an MOU being signed between Bavaria and the Scottish Government.

To my point, I do not think that Greg got up on the morning of the Ludwig-Erhard-Gipfel summit and went, "I am now going to speak for a long time about the UK and energy, and I am going to deliberately ignore Scotland or our ambitions around hydrogen", but that is what happened. So it is a good example of where, if things don't work because people forget or they don't think it is important, or whatever the reason was, it is important that we are attending events, speaking to people, building connections and driving, in this case, renewables—that part of the sector—and international co-operation forward.

Q198 Dr Whitford: Could I turn to the issue of the diaspora? Obviously, the Scottish diaspora is of a similar scale to the Irish diaspora, but the Irish work them harder. I am a Global Irish parliamentarian. They have a Minister for the diaspora. In the Scottish Government's report, they talked about having a designated lead to work with the Scottish diaspora. I know we have the GlobalScot system, but last month, when I was at Houston spaceport and talking about the Scottish space industry, I spoke to the director of the Rice Space Institute, who is from Glasgow and is a GlobalScot but actually feels quite underused. They often don't really know what they are meant to do and where they are meant to plug in. How do we learn from Ireland or other countries with strong diasporas, so that we involve not just people who grew up in Scotland but those who were educated there, did business there or had cultural links there, so that all of them can be promoting Scotland overseas, in whatever circles they are in?

Angus Robertson: That is a really good question, and the timing is really apposite, because we are close to publishing "Scottish Connections". This is about how we best approach the opportunities of diaspora. Yes, it has involved academic study and looking at countries that do this very well. Obviously, we are well aware of how Ireland does its diaspora outreach. I would just make the point that the history, the story—as a living example, Dr Whitford will understand this better than most—is that the diaspora is still different; the Scottish diaspora is different from the Irish diaspora. But I hope that the level of ambition is not.

One thing that I would draw attention to is that there are a number of different diasporas. We can think of those who left a century or two ago; we can think of those who left more recently; and we can think of different countries as being traditional diaspora countries. We tend to think in particular of the Commonwealth and North American countries, but there are other diasporas, which I think are relevant. I also draw attention to the fact that big play has been made of affinity Scots—people who have come to Scotland, lived in Scotland, visit Scotland, love Scotland and then go home. This includes a lot of students. So how do we think about them? Part of the challenge that we have is: how do we get people to self-



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identify that they feel that they are part of that and that they want to do something?

That would just be a general observation. I can't say much more than that at this stage, given that announcements are pending. On the wider point about the GlobalScot—

Q199 **Dr Whitford:** Just before you move on, may I ask this? The alumni, the people who have studied in Scottish universities, are obviously a very recognisable group. Do the Scottish Government or any agency try to engage with people to offer something before they go back home? Do they say, "Come to an event," "Please have this," and "Would you be interested?"?

Angus Robertson: The first thing is to recognise that Scottish universities have a tremendous alumni system in place. They work that very well and, to an extent, it is very important that they manage their own information about who their graduates are. But we are working in partnership with them. Scott Wightman was talking about Tartan Week, which is in its 25th year, and this is an increasingly important dimension to it. I would encourage anybody to go; I think I am right in saying this Committee is going, which is great, because you will be able to see this in practice. One of the growing dimensions to it relates to alumni and the co-operation that there is with Scottish universities. Tartan Week celebrates the contributions of Scots to the United States, and that is exactly the group that we are talking about there. So we do, and there is more that we can do.

Chair: I am very conscious of the time, because we still have to bring in Christine Jardine and Deidre Brock. Have your questions concluded, Philippa?

Dr Whitford: Yes, that's fine.

Q200 **Christine Jardine:** Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. I should say that the Cabinet Secretary and I share a good number of constituents. The last time we met was in the constituency, at Murrayfield. But I did not know until today that we share an interest in federalism. I can appreciate what he meant about the German Länder and how it might have been useful if we had a federal system in this country: the UK Government would automatically have thought in terms of the devolved Administrations. I was very interested in what he was saying about a critical mix between the Foreign Office and Scotland's own representatives in those areas, because that very much reflects what was said by the SDI in the previous session. They were very confident in expressing that the collaboration and togetherness that they can achieve with the FCDO is vital in promoting Scotland's interests. Would you agree with that?

Angus Robertson: I agree that if we can be more than the sum of our parts, that is absolutely what we should be aiming for. As I said in my introductory remarks, I have been able to see with my own eyes examples of where there has been, and continues to be, tremendous cross working,



and I would encourage anybody who is in that sphere to embrace all that. Things are different in different high commissions, in different embassies and in different consulates, who we should not forget. If there is more that we can do to help colleagues in those postings to understand what it is that Scotland is trying to do internationally, that would be a good thing. That would presuppose that we were meeting regularly and that there would be a willingness to have these conversations. I have to say that I was delighted to meet the Foreign Secretary at the end of last year. I think I am right in saying that I was the first person in my post to do so in more than 20 years.

Q201 **Christine Jardine:** But your post is a new one, is it not?

Angus Robertson: External Affairs. When I said “since devolution”, I was corrected when Jack McConnell told me last week that, as a previous External Affairs Secretary, he had met his opposite number at the beginnings of devolution.

Q202 **Christine Jardine:** I appreciate that now. I likened the relationship to being almost like a tree. I have promoted TV and production companies in North America, and I likened it to contacting SDI, with that being the opening—the gateway to a tree that branches out from the consulate in New York, as you rightly mentioned, the embassy in Washington and the embassy in Canada. How important is it to Scotland’s future that we use that network as effectively as possible, and how do you think we can improve the way we use it?

Angus Robertson: Until we have our own diplomatic network as an independent state, which is what all normal independent countries in the world do, we should use the system that we are part of. As long as there is good will in making that work, we should try to make the most of it. Is that a substitute for being directly represented? No, it’s not, because, as we have been exploring, there are unfortunately too many examples of trying to find workarounds or confronting difficulties that other countries do not have because the relationship is not mediated in the same way.

Q203 **Christine Jardine:** How important do you feel it is to promote Scotland the brand? What is the image that we portray to the rest of the world, and how damaging do you think the image of Scotland that the world sees at the moment might be to that brand, particularly given the problems within our NHS and education system? How important is it for the brand that we address them?

Angus Robertson: I think the brand is excellent. I don’t know if Christine Jardine has been able to see the films that are being shown internationally at the present time. In a previous existence, when I lectured on public diplomacy, I was pleased to be able to use Scotland’s international brand imagery as an exemplar, because, as I said before, I am not aware of any other country being able to pull together across its public agencies an agreed brand identity, values and so on. That happens in Scotland, and it is excellent, so I would encourage everybody to use it, including Members of the Westminster Parliament.



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Q204 **Christine Jardine:** I want to ask Mr Wightman about the metaphor that I used of the branches. How important do you think it is that we continue to work collaboratively and develop that approach in the way that we heard from your colleagues previously? I appreciate that you did not hear what they said.

Scott Wightman: I am not sure I can add very much to what the Cabinet Secretary said. For as long as the UK's diplomatic service represents all of the UK, we definitely have an interest in trying to ensure that we have the most productive relationships and conversations in place to enable Scotland to take maximum advantage of what is there.

Q205 **Christine Jardine:** You have both spoken about the additional factors that the Scottish network can bring to the FCDO. Could there be closer working? Is there a way it could be done more closely abroad in overseas missions to bring those factors in?

Angus Robertson: I would reflect on the fact that different posts work in slightly different ways, depending on their size or what their priorities are. There is nothing to stop a British ambassador, high commissioner or deputy head of mission involving Scottish Government officials. They have UK diplomatic passports. Like all civil servants in Great Britain, they are UK civil servants. There is nothing from an administrative point of view that would stop the inclusion of Scottish Government officials taking part in things, but unfortunately there are examples of that happening. The education agreement in Germany is sadly a case in point, and it is one that I discussed with the UK ambassador to Germany myself. It does not take a lot of imagination to think, "Aha! Is this not devolved? Oh, right. Well, maybe we should have our colleagues in from the Scottish Government as part of this conversation." It would take very little to do that. Where there is a willingness, there is a way to make all this work better.

Q206 **Christine Jardine:** Would either of you say there is an ideal model for co-operation?

Scott Wightman: Before addressing that, may I just add something? There is sometimes a lack of appreciation that the devolved Governments might have something interesting and have particular perspectives and interests in areas of reserved responsibility internationally. That is one area where the dialogues and conversations do not take place as helpfully as they might.

Q207 **Christine Jardine:** Do either of you think there is an ideal model of co-operation that we could work towards?

Angus Robertson: I think it comes and goes, which is why I am reticent about pointing to one place. I also want to protect the space for people internationally to hear—whether it is a Scottish Government network or, indeed, the FCDO network—that there are great examples out there. I wish to highlight those; at the same time, I think there is room to grow in others, which I have also tried to highlight.



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I think a lot of this revolves around people. A lot of this revolves around people's willingness to understand the nature of the devolved settlement and to feel empowered to make the most out of it. I appreciate that on the constitutional question, I represent a very different perspective to my UK Government opposite numbers, but we are all in favour of economic success, the promotion of trade, dealing with the climate crisis and so on. Just realising that we all have a legitimate space in which to promote our interests and priorities is not something that one should be fearful of—it should be embraced.

Christine Jardine: You might say that you and I should perhaps do the same where our joint constituents are concerned.

Chair: There we go—a note of consensus.

Q208 **Deidre Brock:** Good afternoon to you both; it is great to see you. Could I just ask about the engagement you have had with the UK Government's new trade and investment hub in Edinburgh—both yourself, Minister, and officials?

Angus Robertson: I do not think I have had any. I should say that I think it is important to differentiate between my job as Cabinet Secretary for External Affairs and my colleagues who work in the enterprise and economy space. The SDI colleagues were here before giving evidence. They answer to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and fellow Ministers on the trade and investment side, rather than to me. Have I been in Queen Elizabeth House? I think I am the first Scottish Government Minister to ever have been invited to go, so yes, I have, and I pass it every day on my way to the Scottish Government office at the top of Jacob's Ladder.

Scott Wightman: There is a Directorate for International Trade and Investment within the Scottish Government, and colleagues there would be the ones having the principal interaction. I have met the head of the office, but in an unofficial context.

Q209 **Deidre Brock:** Previous witnesses—the SDI witnesses—suggested that there was sometimes a nervousness among diplomats in the embassies about favouring one of the devolved nations over the others. Is that something you have come across? If so, how would one overcome that? I do not know how closely you work with counterparts in the other devolved nations.

Angus Robertson: I am unaware of any of that. I have gone to capitals where I have met representatives of the Welsh Government and Northern Irish Executive—that would be in Brussels and in DC—in slightly different models: the Irish representation in Washington, DC, is not at the embassy, if my recollection is right, but a Welsh colleague works in the British Embassy in Brussels. I am not aware of competition in a detrimental way—having a bit of competition is a good thing, frankly. Far from it; I have found when I have gone to events—because people think it is important for a Scottish Government Minister to attend and promote such events—that I have often been introduced to colleagues from Wales or Northern Ireland. They are delighted to attend events, and that is then



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reciprocated. I am sure Scott Wightman can give lots of other examples. However, my experience is that there is a very good working relationship.

Scott Wightman: You can find some nervousness among UK Government officials about devolution issues. That was probably not the case 20 years ago, when people were still familiar with it, and there was perhaps more focus on training and on ensuring that UK civil servants more generally understood the devolution process. Some of those practices have eroded over time, I think. So, the confidence with which individual heads of mission or their staff sometimes engage on issues that touch the devolved Governments can be variable. I think what SDI colleagues were saying was that sometimes, when it is important that there should be a rapid response to a business request, if there is lack of confidence in the mission about how they should deal with devolved institutions, that can sometimes appear to lead to delay. I am not conscious of that myself, personally, but that, as I understand it, was what SDI officials were saying.

Q210 **Deidre Brock:** So, react quickly. That is a constant theme that we have heard over the years, about civil servants in Westminster, or generally—in Whitehall, I suppose—being nervous about handling devolved issues. How do you think one gets around that in future? What needs to be done to address it? It seems to come up time and time again over the years.

Scott Wightman: It is certainly useful when we have opportunities to talk to heads of mission before they go to take up their posts. Those sorts of conversations are useful. I try to use my old personal networks from within the FCDO to make sure that people feel that they can come to me if they have questions. They can come directly, rather than always having to channel them through the devolution unit in the FCDO.

Q211 **Deidre Brock:** Is it time for a more structured approach to raising awareness—a perm sec-down sort of thing?

Scott Wightman: Raising awareness of devolution across the board would be helpful.

Q212 **Deidre Brock:** May I ask about the 2013 memorandum of understanding on international affairs between the devolved Administrations and the UK Government? Minister, you have described it as having “not facilitated good working relations”. Why is that, and how might it be improved? Can it be updated?

Angus Robertson: I have experience in this in a more general sense, in terms of a relationship with the rest of the UK Government as part of my Scottish Government responsibilities. It is very different from one Department to another. There is the infamous example of the Home Office being asked 13 times to meet the Scottish Government to discuss issues, and refusing on all occasions. In the knowledge that I was coming down here to see your good selves, I asked whether I might meet the new Culture Secretary, my opposite number. To date, I think we are still waiting on a reply, and I am heading straight from here to the train station to go back.



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One can point to memoranda and what people say. We aspire to good relations and we wish intergovernmental relations to be good, but it kind of depends on people saying, “Yes, I am going to meet my opposite number”, “Yes, I am going to have discussions about this issue”, “Why have I not met my opposite number in office, ever?”, and so on. So, is there more that can be done? Absolutely, but I think one has to have an awareness of how things operate in practice as opposed to how it is described by some people, which is not at all reflective of the reality of how things actually operate.

Chair: We have you got you right out at 5 o’clock.

Angus Robertson: At this rate, I will make the train.

Chair: Cabinet Secretary, thank you ever so much for your contribution today. There were a couple of things you said that you might get back to us on—I am sure a note was taken. We look forward to your replies. Again, if there is anything that you feel you could constructively assist the Committee with during the course of this inquiry, we would be happy to receive anything. Thank you for your attendance.

ⁱ Clarification from Dr Philippa Whitford MP 21/03/23: “from design concept through to data analysis in Edinburgh”