



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Scottish Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Intergovernmental relations: 25 years since the Scotland Act 1998, HC 149](#)

Tuesday 20 February 2024

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Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Alan Brown; Wendy Chamberlain; David Duguid; Christine Jardine; Ms Anum Qaisar; Douglas Ross; Michael Shanks.

Questions 211-299

Witness

[I](#): Alex Salmond, First Minister of Scotland 2007-2014.



Examination of witness

Witness: Alex Salmond.

Q211 **Chair:** Welcome to the Scottish Affairs Committee. This morning we are delighted to be joined by former First Minister Alex Salmond as part of our inquiry into 25 years of devolution. Alex, of course, was the First Minister between 2007 and 2014. If you don't mind, Alex, could you introduce yourself and give a short introductory statement?

Alex Salmond: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I am delighted to be here. I was checking the record, and I gave evidence to this Committee in 2010—over 10 years ago. You, Mr Chairman, are the only surviving member, so you must be in for some sort of award for longevity and long service on this Committee.

I obviously welcome your study and report, and I am delighted to give evidence. I will obviously respond to your questions, but I will argue that, in my experience, there have been three phases of intragovernmental co-operation. The first phase is what I found when I was elected in 2007 as First Minister, which was that the structures of devolution had totally broken down. There had not been a plenary Joint Ministerial Committee for five years between 2002 and 2007. I should say that the European one was still working; in fact, Jack Straw, who was Foreign Secretary, told me once that because that was working, he assumed all the others were working as well. He just made that assumption, but it was actually only the European one that was working, because it was set by European Council meetings and discussions between Ministers.

I knew that beforehand, in preparing for government—in anticipation of, and hoping for, victory—and I had actually put it in the manifesto. The 2007 SNP manifesto had a commitment to re-establish, if possible—obviously, it takes agreement—the formal mechanisms of the Joint Ministerial Committee, and that is what I sought to do. I did not manage that in the six or seven weeks when I co-existed with Prime Minister Blair, mainly because he did not speak to me at all; I did not have a single conversation with him over that period. I actually believe—I will substantiate this in answer to questions—that the key reason for the breakdown of the intragovernmental committees was the attitude of the then Prime Minister. I think he was totally uninterested in the mechanics of devolution; he had other things that he perhaps felt were more important. So I would place the responsibility squarely on him.

The evidence for that is that when Gordon Brown came in, it was totally different. For example, I spoke to Gordon on his first day in office, as he spoke to me on my first day in office. The JMC plenary was re-established, and other meetings were established. We tried to get a better format for them, and it was pretty successful. There were a number of key successes and key workings together, and a number of resolutions of old disputes. Importantly, a dispute resolution procedure was—I cannot remember if it

was established before the election of 2010 or immediately afterwards, but it was certainly in the process of being established.

There was a wee bit of tension as the election approached—as an election approaches, there tends to be a bit of sensitivity between Governments, which there perhaps is not immediately after the election. But to give credit to Prime Minister Brown, the system was re-established. Traditionally, historically, Gordon Brown had much more interest in devolution than Tony Blair had.

The situation improved again under Prime Minister Cameron; I saw that David is meeting the Foreign Minister of China this week, so perhaps we will call it the golden age of the Joint Ministerial Committee. There were reasons—political reasons—why 2010 to 2014 was the most successful period for that system of intra-Government co-operation. Obviously, you should co-operate where you can—that is what we are here to do: work for the best interests of the country or your constituency. Politically, I was keen to see intragovernmental co-operation work because I wanted that to transition into intergovernmental co-operation. I saw it as part of a process leading to independence, so I wanted to see good, co-operative structures that could then evolve into a British council of states or whatever. So I had a political end in mind as well as wanting to see decent relationships where we could.

On the last of the three periods—obviously, I was not involved as a practising politician, but as an intelligent layperson observing it, it seems to have been one of fairly total breakdown in relationships. In doing my revision for this Committee, I looked at various works that had been done on that, including the unanimous 2018 Public Administration Committee report, led by Bernard Jenkin, that put responsibility on to Brexit and particularly the UK Government's attitude to the devolved Administrations in terms of the Brexit legislation. You may take a different view, but that was their view.

I read the detail of the new IGR system with the secretariat. It looks pretty complicated; I get suspicious when I see something with four diagrams. But it is only just coming in, so it is pretty early to judge. It is certainly badly needed. There were clear public examples—during the covid inquiry, for instance. Or there was David Cameron's extraordinary and out-of-character, in my view, letter about Humza Yousaf in December: about Humza meeting President Erdoğan and the Prime Minister of Iceland. In a properly working system, people do not issue public rebukes of that kind. I am sure that David's diplomacy now as Foreign Secretary is much greater elsewhere.

So there seems to have been a breakdown since then. I would say that there were three phases. There was the initial falling into disuse after devolution; there was the establishment of what was always intended in the JMC system; and, more recently, I have seen extreme difficulties as an observer.

Q212 **Chair:** Thank you. I know you have had a bit of a journey to join us this



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morning, having flown in from Berlin, but we are delighted that you are here with us. I think you are absolutely right; that is what we have heard in this inquiry thus far—the three phases that you so adequately describe and define have been the characteristic of the devolution years. Yesterday we heard from three former Secretaries of State from that first period, when Labour Governments were in place across all the Parliaments and Assemblies of the United Kingdom. They talked about inter-Government relationships being defined by chats in the tearoom or cosy evening chats on a Friday night. I am supposing that when you became First Minister, those cosy evening Friday night chats on the phone came to an end.

I am just wondering: when you came into position, what was your view about how inter-Government relations were being discussed? What did you make of the system that you inherited?

Alex Salmond: I did not have the opportunity to see the evidence from yesterday. The old look back, the young look forward and the middle-aged look around. There is a tendency to look back to this period of chumminess, but that is not what I found when I took office. I found a huge number of unresolved disputes. Some were public—for example, the dispute on attendance allowance when Henry McLeish introduced free personal care. There was obviously a reduction in attendance allowance spending. Henry argued, I think rightly, that that money should be allocated to Scotland to support the free personal care system, because there was no detriment to Westminster finances. That was unresolved. Famously, there was the Olympic regeneration funding. I spoke to Rhodri Morgan and we were mutually congratulating each other on his re-election and my election. His first words to me were, “We’ve got to get the Olympic funding, Alec.” Rhodri pursued that heavily and publicly, and eventually successfully, once we got the system established, although I think Rhodri was out of office by then.

There were other things that were not public. I found a bill for high tens of millions of pounds, which was a claim for security costs for the Gleneagles summit of 2005. It was a ridiculous proposition, if you think about it. Summits take place regularly in London with security implications and they are not Barnetted. If money is, rightly, spent on a summit in London, there is no shared risk to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Therefore, if you choose to have a summit in Gleneagles—a great thing—in 2005, the idea that suddenly Scotland should bear an element of the security costs struck me as farfetched, and eventually that was dropped.

There were many, many disputes, some of which went back years, which had been left unresolved. So whatever the cosy chats were doing, they were not resolving disputes. Also, I would not say that it was satisfactory to claim that you could replace a system that was devised of Joint Ministerial Committees with the opportunity to have chats. There was certainly an advantage—no question about it—when negotiations were taking place between people who had known each other for some time and who had been part of this place, in the case of Henry McLeish and myself,



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Rhodri Morgan in Wales and Ian Paisley in Northern Ireland. There were certain advantages to that, but that could never replace a proper system.

The idea that there were no disputes to be resolved was just untrue. There were many, many disputes and, to a certain extent, despite the absence of JMC meetings, the civil service got on with the business of co-operating on a day-to-day basis. That was starting to affect relationships in the civil service as well as the absence of JMC meetings. When disputes lie unresolved for years, they become bones of contention.

Q213 Chair: From cosy chats then, you put something in the press in the last few days that there was not even a telephone call from Tony Blair to congratulate you on becoming First Minister. Do you find that rather odd and strange behaviour from a Prime Minister to a new First Minister who had just been elected?

Alex Salmond: I think he was upset. I think the Scottish elections of 2007 were the first parliamentary elections he had lost, so I can only take it that he was really miffed. Famously, I think he said that he never phones and he never writes, in answer to your colleague Annabel Goldie in the Parliament. Of course, it was very much to his detriment and, I should stress, it was a totally different attitude from that of the incoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, who of course I had known for years. It was kind of strange behaviour.

Much more serious were the events that were taking place in the Libyan desert. In terms of personal discourtesies—neither here nor there in some ways—what was happening in the Libyan desert at the time was a very substantial breach of any devolution protocol.

Q214 Chair: I have seen you refer to this in some of the exchanges we have had. What specifically is it you are suggesting that Tony Blair did?

Alex Salmond: In late May 2007, the Prime Minister Tony Blair was in the desert in Libya with Colonel Gaddafi, simultaneously negotiating a prisoner transfer agreement and oil concessions for British Petroleum and pretending, or maintaining, that there was no connection between the two. Subsequently, of course, we know there was, certainly in the minds of the Libyans and everybody else's mind as well, a straight connection: the Libyans were expecting, as a quid pro quo of agreeing to concessions for British Petroleum that they would effect the release of Mr Megrahi from a Scottish prison.

There are two aspects to this. One aspect is whether that is an appropriate way to deal with judicial matters, but the second—which you are interested in—is if you are negotiating a prisoner transfer agreement which affects Scotland, you are under an obligation to let the Scottish authorities know. Of course, it cut across the whole Scottish judicial system. To be fair, the Prime Minister had not let his own Cabinet colleagues know, never mind the Scottish Government. The policy issue was more substantial than the personal discourtesy or the ethics of negotiating an oil deal and a prisoner transfer simultaneously.



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Q215 **Chair:** And of course you were First Minister when the independence referendum took place and you negotiated the Edinburgh Agreement, to which you are a signatory. This goes to the second phase that you describe in the three parts of devolution. I think everybody suspected that that would be the most difficult and prickly of all the intergovernmental relations that we would see in the past 25 years, but witnesses have told us that there was almost a golden age of devolution and intergovernmental relations, where everybody was working together and co-operating. Is that how you saw it?

Alex Salmond: It sounds counterintuitive, but when you actually think about it, it's not. You've got to look at political motivations. Once the process by which independence would be voted on through the Edinburgh Agreement had been set, of course it was a political incentive for the Westminster Government not to behave in a manner which would be seen to be overbearing, because that would have an impact on the Scottish electorate. Take the example I gave earlier: I never received a letter from David Cameron in the manner that he addressed Humza Yousaf just last December about meeting other Heads of State. It would have been very counterproductive for the Prime Minister to engage in that sort of activity. Of course, it was also in the interests of the Scottish Government not to appear unreasonable—not to be obstreperous.

Both Governments had an interest, in terms of trying to maximise their support in the run-up to the independence referendum, in not having silly fights about other things. Of course, because the main issue was going to be in the referendum, it meant that other things did not have to be used as proxy power struggles or arm-wrestling matches, and people just got on with it.

To a great extent that was the situation, although I would say that that had been established first with Gordon Brown and then with David Cameron before the Edinburgh Agreement. But you are quite right: counterintuitively, it was something of a golden age for intragovernmental relations. Clearly, we should have more referendums, and then we could have a golden age progressively.

Q216 **Chair:** I will leave members of the Committee to decide their view on that particular issue.

When you came to power and looked at intergovernmental relations, you talked about trying to improve them—from intra into inter; that was your objective and mission when it came to your constitutional ambitions for Scotland. When you saw intergovernmental relations, what did you make of them? Obviously there are the three tiers, with Government to Government, and the work that was going on between the Standing Committees and the work at official level. How did you assess them, and did you do anything practically to try to improve them that you could share with the Committee?

Alex Salmond: I wrote to Gordon Brown immediately on his coming to office; I spoke to him about it on the phone. As Chancellor—just as Jack Straw as Foreign Secretary wasn't aware of how much things had broken



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down—he thought things were all working because his area was working. Gordon wasn't necessarily very aware that there had not been a JMC. There was no particular reason that he should have been aware, but he readily wanted to restore it.

John Elvidge, who was my permanent secretary, was very keen on restoring it, for the reasons I said earlier: he felt it was starting to impinge on the civil service relationship because there were running sores of disputes. Civil servants, by and large, like a forum where Ministers are meeting, and then they can go off and execute what was agreed, as opposed to having to make it up themselves. There was very much a wish for that. Of course, I knew this beforehand because of the briefings that had taken place in the preparations for the election, and that is why I put it in the manifesto.

We actually had a manifesto commitment, which I executed. I mean, it takes two to tango; I didn't have any success in the six weeks with Mr Blair, but as soon as Gordon came to power, he was very willing to see the matter re-established. As I say, there were a few tensions in the run-up to the 2010 election, and when David Cameron came in, he was extremely keen to see these relationships. We had a very early plenary meeting in Downing Street—around the Cabinet table, if I remember rightly.

Q217 Chair: Lastly, for completeness: you refer to the third period of devolution, which has been the much more tetchy years—the last few years. As a former First Minister who had to deal with intergovernmental relations, do you have any views about what you observe in the current condition of intergovernmental relations?

Alex Salmond: Well, I took a note of what Bernard Jenkin's Committee said. It is worth quoting the Committee: "Whitehall still operates extensively on the basis of a structure and culture which take little account of the realities of devolution".

In relation to Brexit, the same report said: "It is highly regrettable that there was little consultation with devolved Governments in advance of the publication of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, as earlier consultation could have possibly avoided much of the acrimony that was created between the UK Government and the devolved Governments."

Therefore, that Committee, to a great extent, put the responsibility for that breakdown around Brexit and the aftermath of Brexit on to the shoulders of the UK Government. It is a unanimous report, so it should carry—presumably—some weight. You and I have both known Bernard for many years, and he is a very capable chair and I was impressed by the report.

That was a very tense period and the UK Government, no doubt under a whole variety of pressures, neglected to do the very obvious thing and work out the implications of what they were doing for the devolved Administrations. That seems clear now.



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There is that example. I don't know whether you want me to do this just now, but I was very struck by the letter that David Cameron wrote; I think it was to Angus Robertson, but it was actually directed at Humza Yousef. It complained about the meeting with President Erdogan and the Prime Minister of Iceland. I thought that was not only out of character—I don't know if the letter was just left over from the previous Foreign Secretary and David signed it, but I do not recognise that in his character. It is such a ridiculous proposition.

Here is an example. At the end of 2013, I was on a visit to China. The meetings were at high level, the reason for which was that I had a personal friendship with Premier Li Keqiang, who had come to Edinburgh; he was an economist. So, more than in other countries, we got access at the highest level.

I just took a note of this this morning. At that time, the UK Government were in the doghouse. David Cameron and Nick Clegg had met the Dalai Lama in secret at St Paul's Cathedral, the Chinese had taken offence and there had been a year of very, very cool relations.

I was meeting Foreign Minister Yang, who was not a party official; he was a Foreign Minister. I went to a meeting at the embassy the night before and Sir Sebastian Wood, who was the British ambassador, asked if he could accompany me—in fact, he got his chargé d'affaires, who was Scottish, to ask me—into the meeting in the leadership compound in Beijing. Of course he had not been there for over a year; he had been shut out. He had been—literally, or rather metaphorically—in the doghouse. No contact.

I agreed. Why shouldn't I agree to that, if I could be of some service, because of the position that I was able to have? So, we had the meeting, it was very successful and within weeks proper relations had been restored. David Cameron had a meeting here; he then had President Xi for a pint of beer. And the golden age of UK-China relations—the short-lived golden age of UK-China relations—then came forward.

Look, I am not making the point that that would not have happened without that meeting in Beijing; no doubt some other means would have been found to do it, of course. I am not, as you know, press-averse, but I didn't release a press statement saying, "Look what I've done", or write a snotty letter to the Prime Minister saying, "Ha, ha, ha!"

I mean, that sort of courtesy that I showed was a two-way process; I did it, because I knew that there would be other—

Q218 Chair: Are you maybe suggesting that First Ministers could be used as possible ambassadorial or diplomatic tools and means to try and resolve some of these situations?

Alex Salmond: Well, that is what happened. You know, it was just to get the ambassador into the leadership compound, so that they could re-establish things. The Chinese were going to do it anyway; people only stay in the doghouse for a point of time.



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The point I am making is that I did that without fanfare or without trying to make—until this moment, I have never talked about that meeting publicly. But because I knew that there would be other occasions where I required the help of the British ambassador, perhaps in a circumstance I was less familiar with, and I needed their expertise and their help and their staff to assist in what I was doing. It was a reciprocal thing. There was no detriment to Scotland in Sir Sebastian Wood being in that meeting. Nothing I said to the Foreign Minister of China about Scottish independence would be a surprise to the British ambassador, so there was no restraint. The meeting was actually conducted in English. That was the only time that happened with a Chinese Minister, in my experience, but Foreign Minister Yang was very erudite and qualified—he studied at the LSE. He was a very interesting, humorous man. The meeting was conducted in English, and there was no restraint on it. There was no detriment to me in having the British ambassador there.

Therefore, this idea that Humza must be chaperoned when he goes to meet the Icelandic Prime Minister—what is he going to say to the Icelandic Prime Minister that she is unaware of?—is symptomatic of a very sharp deterioration in relationships between 2013 and now. Of course, maybe when David Cameron gets his feet under the table as Foreign Secretary, he will go back to the attitude he had in 2013.

Chair: We will see. Thank you for that.

Q219 **Alan Brown:** Hi Alex. You spoke about some unresolved disputes when you took over and said there was no formal mechanism for resolving them. Obviously, the cosy chats weren't working. Am I right in thinking there was an issue with budget underspends? If the then Scottish Government had not spent their full allocation of budget, Westminster would effectively hold on to that. That was another matter that had to be resolved.

Alex Salmond: And it was resolved, Alan. It was a big problem for the then Labour-Liberal Administration, and it was resolved as part of an agreement with the Treasury that said that you could have more financial flexibility, so that if there was an underspend, it could be carried over to next year. There was more flexibility. That was a negotiation that took place between the Finance Ministers, and it was successfully carried out. Thinking back, I suspect that it had not been resolved previously because there were not the formal mechanisms in place.

One of the great gains of that period of resuming the JMCs and the formal meetings was the dispute resolution procedure. In total—I checked back last week—we had five issues that were to go to the dispute mechanism, which was established in 2010, and only one of them went the full way. It is really interesting, because if the UK Government or a devolved Administration is putting forward—how should I describe it?—an adventurous position, you wouldn't go the full way of a dispute mechanism because you would end up getting your exam paper marked adversely, so it has a way of resolving itself.



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The only one that went all the way was Rhodri Morgan's favourite subject—the Olympic spending. I should say that it was not the Olympic games themselves; it was the infrastructure around the games, which by the rules of the Barnett formula should have been Barnetted—there should have been a coefficient. Rhodri Morgan—I think he had left office by that time—was right that he didn't get as much for the devolved Administrations as he had hoped. None the less, in principle he was correct. It was not an insignificant sum: it was tens of millions for Scotland and probably about half that for Wales. That went to the dispute mechanism, and I think the flexibility in the finances came about because the meetings with the Finance Ministers meant that an agreement between officials was able to come about.

Q220 Alan Brown: You said that, for the Olympics, it was tens of millions of pounds in Barnett consequential. Do you remember how much money the finance agreement on the underspend freed up?

Alex Salmond: It was very substantial—much more than that. I am sure a great deal was made of it politically—I probably made a great deal of it politically. It is not that difficult, in a budget of what was then £40 billion or £50 billion, to undershoot by the high hundreds of millions. It is also quite possible to go the other way, so the flexibility is the important thing. Not having the undershoot docked from the Scottish Government finances would have been worth a matter of billions to Scotland over a period of time.

I think that a very serious thing has occurred since the period we are talking about—2014—and that is the new financial structures that have evolved since the Smith Commission report, which I think are vastly detrimental to the devolved Administrations. That is basically because the Barnett formula is a bit like Palmerston and the Schleswig-Holstein question, in that only three people understood it: one is mad, one is dead and I have forgotten it. Actually, I have not forgotten it; I understand the Barnett formula for many reasons.

What has happened is that Barnett has been qualified by a growth reward system and because the devolved Administrations are unlikely to be growing as fast as the south-east of England and because their growth potential is determined by UK fiscal policy and, in the case of Scotland, the performance of the energy industry, if there is a penalty for low growth, as there is within the formula now, that can be severely detrimental to Scottish finances. It is an adjustment to the Barnett formula, which is a huge impost on Scotland at the moment. You could only have ever agreed this either from a position of great political weakness or total innumeracy, or both. The fact that that has now been subject to a review and agreed again, I find that totally bewildering. It would certainly not have been agreed in the period you are talking about when we were actually negotiating flexibility of Scotland's finances.

Q221 Alan Brown: In terms of Government relations or planning, if we go back to the Barnett formula as was, obviously a lot of the money gets released through the Barnett formula because the UK Government decides a need



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in England, they are going to spend money in England and then Scotland gets a pro-rata share. Or if it is a budget overspend, Scotland might eventually get a pro-rata share. Therefore, at a Budget, Scotland is meant to be grateful for the Barnett. But is that not an impossible way to actually plan long-term finances as well?

Alex Salmond: It is difficult. There were certain advantages to it, but not the advantages you would have in terms of flexibility and overall command of your budget and fiscal policy. Remember, Barnett is about the increase or decrease in spending. It is a pro-rata, as you put it, adjusted population share of the increase—not of the whole, but of the increase or decrease. Whatever you might think about the limitations of Barnett—you are quite right, they are no substitute for what you might have elsewhere—the fact that it has been adjusted in this terms of growth imposition means that if your economy is growing more slowly, as it has been recently in terms of the UK, which is affected very much by the south-east of England's growth, it is a double penalty. You would think that if things were not going as well as they should, you would get a bonus to say, "We will help you pull things up."

What happens is that there is a double penalty at the present moment. I saw a calculation, which I have no reason to doubt—it is not my calculation—that of the billion pounds of additional spending the Scottish Government have raised from increased taxation, about 90% has been swallowed up by deductions through the growth formula that has been put into Barnett. Just think of that. It is a huge difficulty and I have no idea why. If that had been proposed to me back then, it would have been in the disputes procedure for ever and a day, I can tell you.

Q222 **Alan Brown:** Can I take you back to devolution and the concept of making devolution work? Yesterday, we had a lot of evidence and the view from us gathering evidence yesterday from the Scottish Secretaries of State's positions was that now relationships have broken down because, basically, the SNP as a Government do not want devolution to work. You have already set your stall out that you wanted devolution to work as part of that pathway to independence and actually having positive Government structures.

I will take you back. I do not know if you remember, but this is an interview from February 2008 given by Baron Foulkes of Cumnock. He said, "The SNP are on a very dangerous tack. What they are doing is trying to build up a situation in Scotland where the services are manifestly better than south of the border in a number of areas." The interviewer, Colin MacKay, then asked if that was a bad thing. Then George Foulkes said, "No, but they are doing it deliberately." Is that very much an attitude of "Let's make it work, but let's actually improve services"?

Alex Salmond: Yes, it was, and I think I reminded Baron Foulkes of it a number of times. He was in the Scottish Parliament for four years between 2007 and 2011. I do not think he expected to be there; he was on the list in the Lothians for the Labour party. I probably reminded him of it quite a



few times. My idea was that one of the key components—not the only one—of building the case for independence was to govern the country competently. That was on the basis that if people thought you could run the shop, then they would have more confidence in you running the areas that the devolved Parliament was not in charge of. It is about building confidence, and that meant running things productively and progressively.

Why have they broken down recently? Again, they have not broken down recently because there has been a defined referendum date or process to independence; they have broken down perhaps because there has not been. Many subjects are used as arm wrestling bouts as a proxy for the constitutional argument. We must remember that there have been key difficulties in that period. There was obviously Brexit and covid, which perhaps put additional strains on intergovernmental relations. I cannot help feeling that, in the absence of a defined process, lots of arguments that otherwise would have just been settled and agreed somehow become proxies for an overall constitutional battle. Perhaps the best idea would be to have a defined process, like in Northern Ireland.

Q223 Alan Brown: Can I take you back to intergovernmental relations at an official level? You already said that your permanent secretary, Sir John Eldridge, had some frustrations. What was the working relationship like between officials, and did it improve during that period?

Alex Salmond: Rather than me citing Sir John, the Committee should go back to the evidence he gave, with me, 10 years ago. You can see exactly what he said and how he couched it in civil service language. Sir John was a very powerful permanent secretary, as was his successor, Sir Peter Housden. They regarded what they were seeking for the Scottish Administration as parity of esteem. They did not want to pretend to be an independent Government, but they wanted parity of esteem for the Government. They wanted intragovernmental relations to be carried forward on that basis, and they therefore devoted themselves to ensuring the prestige of their Departments and carried themselves as permanent secretaries in that manner. I am not at all certain that their successor did that.

If you treat yourself as another UK Government Department, then you should not be surprised if other UK Government Departments start seeing you in that way. Sir John Eldridge and Sir Peter Housden would not have seen their job every Wednesday to be at interdepartmental meetings down here, as their successor did. They regarded their job as making sure that the Scottish Government was running effectively, properly, and had parity of esteem with negotiations. They did not regard the Scottish Government as another UK Whitehall Department.

Q224 Alan Brown: Despite that, are you aware of some accusations that civil servants working for the Scottish Government are not impartial any more? Richard Hardy, the National Secretary for Scotland and Ireland at Prospect, and Dave Penman, General Secretary of the FDA, have both expressed concern about the impartiality of civil servants in Scotland. You managed the build-up to the referendum, and there was a Government



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White Paper. Were there any difficulties with officials back then? They were working for a Scottish Government elected by the Scottish electorate, so effectively responding to the wishes of the electorate. Were there any issues with accusations of impartiality or politicisation of the civil service back then?

Alex Salmond: There was certainly controversy. Some people such as Baron Foulkes found it difficult to adjust to the idea that a civil service working for a Government that had been elected on a mandate to seek Scottish independence should work, as the Government wished, to try to formulate the independence plan. As I remember it, Baron Foulkes was not fully adjusted to that idea. He can still speak for himself—summon him before your Committee!

Most people, and certainly the key people involved such as Sir John Eldridge, made it clear from day one that the Government had been elected, and therefore it was the duty of the civil service to effect that Government's policy as best they could. Of course, that is the way it has to be.

Q225 **Alan Brown:** Did UK civil servants reporting to the UK Government respect that as well?

Alex Salmond: They were obviously working to a different agenda. That is where the parity of esteem and mutual respect come in. People can have disagreements in a negotiation as long as everybody knows which side they are on. Then you come to an agreement and you move on.

It is true, as you will see from Sir John Elvidge's evidence, that they much preferred the dispute, if there was a dispute, or the argument to be between the Ministers, and then once there was the agreement they could go off and implement it. They were absolutely delighted with the Edinburgh Agreement because it cleared the way for what exactly was happening and they could get on with the independence White Paper, the agreement of mutual respect and all the rest of it. Once the Ministers had come to the decision, the civil service on both sides of the border were good.

My own impression of the UK civil service, in terms of the problems, is forgetfulness. Some Departments forget about Scottish implications for what they are doing. Rather than at that stage there being some great conspiracy in Whitehall Departments to do Scotland down—or Wales or Northern Ireland—they just forgot it was there. Again, at the ministerial meetings—remember, when you have a ministerial meeting, it means that Department is not consumed by the Joint Ministerial Committee. But if there was a plenary meeting of the JMC, that would be a major event that was coming up and the Cabinet Office had to plan for to make sure it was carried forward properly, look at all the implications and prepare the briefing papers. Nobody in the Cabinet Office would forget there were devolved implications when they were organising a JMC Plenary meeting. Similarly with the other Departments. So in a way the JMC's resumption



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was important to stop the absentmindedness of Whitehall Departments, in my opinion.

Q226 Douglas Ross: Mr Brown asked you about your policies and the actions you took as First Minister in your Government. So, do you believe it was your progressive policies and delivery that should be celebrated in your time as First Minister?

Alex Salmond: Yes. I am always suspicious of questions like that. Is he leading me on to a killer riposte?

Q227 Douglas Ross: Not really. It is just looking at the facts rather than your own assumptions and calculations of your time in office. On education, PISA rankings in reading, maths and science fell throughout your time as First Minister. Drug deaths increased from 2007 to 2014. And of course you agreed the contracts to build two ferries that still are not servicing the islands they were supposed to work for. Is that the type of delivery you think should be celebrated?

Alex Salmond: On the third one, I had no part or agreement on the contracts for the ferries. If you check the record—

Q228 Douglas Ross: You had no part at all?

Alex Salmond: The contracts for the ferries were sometime after I left office, Douglas. Check the record.

Q229 Douglas Ross: Just on that point, if we are going to argue that point, you were involved in the earlier stages to secure the contract going to that yard.

Alex Salmond: No. Okay, let me give you a bit of timescale. The saving of the Ferguson yard took place in August/September 2014.

Q230 Douglas Ross: Just before the referendum

Alex Salmond: Just before the referendum, yes. I left office in November 2014. I promise you the two ferry contracts—I don't know where they were in the ether, but they certainly were not anywhere near the civil service. They were negotiated sometime after I left office.

Q231 Douglas Ross: But you were involved in the nationalisation of that yard.

Alex Salmond: No. I was involved in saving the yard and a private business took over the yard. The nationalisation of the yard was four years later. It is meant to be people like me who, looking back over the last 20 years, get our dates mixed up, Douglas. You are meant to be on the spot and on the ball. Two Parliaments—it would be quite exhausting going back and forward.

Douglas Ross: Fortunately, you do not have that problem any more since you are not sitting in either. I just wonder about that point. You were involved in the early stages, but if you don't want to—

Alex Salmond: Let me—



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Chair: Alex, what we will do here is we will ask questions and get answers. Then we will be able to move on.

Q232 **Douglas Ross:** If you would like not to focus on ferries, on the point about education and drug deaths, did drug deaths increase?

Alex Salmond: I want you to acknowledge, Douglas, that your assumption about my involvement in the ferry contracts was incorrect. It is manifestly incorrect. I will not ask you to apologise, because you are not a Minister. I am sure you are not deliberately misleading the Committee. I just want you to acknowledge that your memory had failed you.

Q233 **Douglas Ross:** I am going to speak about education.

Alex Salmond: No; I want you to acknowledge first—

Douglas Ross: I am happy to do that. Mr Salmond—

Alex Salmond: Excellent. And then we will go on to education.

Chair: Order. Stop, please, both of you. We will ask questions and secure responses, and then move on to the next member of the Committee. If we could conduct our proceedings in that manner, I am sure it would be much more productive.

Douglas Ross: I am not surprised that Mr Salmond doesn't want us to talk about the ferries, because obviously that has been a serious issue throughout his time in government and for subsequent Governments.

Alex Salmond: No, not about my time in government—

Q234 **Douglas Ross:** I want to focus on education because Scotland's PISA rankings dropped in reading, maths and science from 2007 to 2014—throughout your time in office—and drug deaths increased from 2007 to 2014. They have increased even further since then. Is that the type of delivery you believe is competent government?

Alex Salmond: I keep saying a list of various things that the Government which I was in charge of put forward, because they are still being repeated today. But rather than you and I bandying it about, Douglas, surely the record of my Government in office was tested in the 2011 election, where, for the first and only time in devolution history under a proportional system, the Government was elected with an absolute majority in a PR system. So, rather than my judgment or your judgment, that was the judgment of the people at that stage, having seen the record of an SNP Administration for the very period that Alan asked me about, and the very period that Baron Foulkes was commenting on.

Q235 **Douglas Ross:** I know why Mr Brown asked you that, but I am just wondering what your reflections are on the number of people who died in Scotland as a result of drug misuse during your time as First Minister. Is that something you regret?

Alex Salmond: I think it's appalling. The area of drug misuse is a huge social issue. I welcome the fact that there is a change in approach in our



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engagement with it. At that time, when I was in office, the deaths from alcohol abuse were greater than the deaths from drug abuse—they crossed on a curve afterwards—and we were extremely focused on that as a major social issue. I have been involved in the drugs policy since Michael Forsyth launched his war on drugs in—1997, was it? There is a whole range of things, Douglas, that we have not got to grips with, which are not superficial things; they are profound things. But there is no Administration over that period of time that can claim credit for solving the extreme difficulty that Scotland has with drug abuse.

Q236 **Douglas Ross:** Scotland's international reputation for excellence in education did fall under your time as First Minister.

Alex Salmond: Well, but the international reputation for excellence in education would also look at university rankings and college rankings, which rose very considerably. I think, incidentally, in terms of the amount of opportunity that youngsters in Scotland had to take part in that, had a significant advance from the abolition of any form of tuition fee—

Q237 **Douglas Ross:** Have you not looked at the PISA rankings?

Alex Salmond: That gave Scottish students a huge advantage over elsewhere. Look, I will very happily debate with you the record of the SNP Government between 2007 and 2014 till the cows come home.

Douglas Ross: Finally on that point, then.

Alex Salmond: This Committee, I assumed, was interested in the subject matter for which it was called. I have been known occasionally, in your place as now, Douglas, to wander off into other subjects, but, please, on you go.

Douglas Ross: I was just coming in on the back of Mr Brown. You were very happy to answer the question when it was put positively.

Alex Salmond: No, no. Douglas—

Douglas Ross: Can I just ask—

Alex Salmond: I am very happy to—

Douglas Ross: Mr Salmond—

Chair: Order. This is not helpful to the people who are listening to these proceedings. Will you please conduct them in a much more orderly fashion?

Q238 **Douglas Ross:** You speak about university education, but I presume you accept and acknowledge the PISA rankings. Therefore, what is your view on maths, reading and science, and Scotland falling down the international rankings during your time in office? It was a downward trajectory from 2007 to 2014.

Alex Salmond: First, I deprecate those who don't acknowledge the successes of Scottish education. We should be able to acknowledge failings



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as well, but Scottish education is not as you have described it very often in your public statements. Scottish education has been an exceptional advance for many, many young people in Scotland. The proof of that, of course, is if you look at the destinations of youngsters in Scotland in terms of work or apprenticeships—

Q239 **Douglas Ross:** Look at the PISA rankings that I am asking you about.

Alex Salmond: I am answering your question about education, Douglas—

Douglas Ross: You're not.

Alex Salmond: That has risen progressively and successively, and we should be pleased at that.

Q240 **Douglas Ross:** Why is it so difficult for you to answer about PISA rankings?

Alex Salmond: There is some distance still to travel in a range of areas, but across the range of things that the Government did between 2007 and 2014, I think the public in Scotland were pretty satisfied with the overall performance.

Douglas Ross: You just don't want to answer about the bad bits.

Chair: I think we have exhausted that line of questioning. I call Christine Jardine.

Q241 **Christine Jardine:** Good morning, Mr Salmond. It is nice to see you again. Returning to the machinery of the IGR, in 2007—as you have already said—you sought to revive that, including the Joint Ministerial Committee. You have mentioned already that your motivation was independence—you wanted to move Scotland towards independence. I think it would be fair to say that at the same time the UK Government's motivation was to avoid independence.

If we have moved into a golden period—as you've said—to what extent do you think that was because we had two Governments with a joint aim, in a way, and something in common? One wanted to pursue independence, and the other wanted to avoid it. The issue of independence united them on something that they had to make work for their own motivations, and the UK Government were as motivated to make it work as you were.

Alex Salmond: I said earlier on, Christine, that good governance is a good thing to have, and as constituency MSPs and MPs you pursue that as well as pursuing your political ends. There is a great deal of truth in the fact that, once the process of the independence referendum was settled and agreed, it meant both Governments had an incentive to be on their best behaviour—let's put it that way. As I said earlier, it was counterintuitive and not necessary what you might have expected, but none the less I think it is agreed on all sides that that is what happened, and I thought that was very useful.



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In my view, good governance—whether concerning the Government of Scotland or the relationships with Westminster—was helpful to the case I was trying to put forward. That case was that relationships could be as good after independence as they were before independence. I placed no premium whatsoever in seeing two Governments at war over things that mattered. Politics is politics and you cannot stop politicians being politicians, but when people are in charge of negotiating things that are going to matter to a lot of people they should, if at all possible, sit down and get on with it.

Q242 Christine Jardine: What particular steps did you take to try to improve the situation post-2007 when the JMC was up and working again? What particular steps did you take to try and improve the inter-Government relationship?

Alex Salmond: We have already spoken about Sir Anthony Blair's period, which was beyond my ken. But when Gordon came into office I think I wrote to him on day 1, and I spoke to him on the phone when we were mutually congratulating each other on our offices and so on. He was very willing to see it re-established, and thought it was a good move—as you rightly say, from a different perspective, but none the less. Gordon, traditionally and historically, was somebody who was very interested in devolution and had been for many years.

Of course, you have also got to remember the situation in Northern Ireland. The Northern Irish Executive was coming out of abeyance at that time, and Dr Paisley and Martin McGuinness were re-establishing the Executive. I had a very good relationship with both of them—for different reasons—and I went out of my way to help them, which I think anybody who is at all sensible would have wanted to do. Things were happening that allowed that whole JMC process to have great meaning.

There is no doubt that a devolved administration point of view—whether you are Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland—is very helpful when all three Administrations are functioning, because more often than not you will have a similar concern about an issue. That makes the meetings less challenging than they otherwise might be.

Q243 Christine Jardine: One of the things we heard from the witnesses yesterday, quite categorically, was that they saw the period before what you described as a "golden age", in the period up to 2007, as a golden age, in a way. There was a lot of collaboration and there was a great spirit of collaborating to make devolution work. In your own evidence today, you have told us that Gordon Brown was much more effective than Tony Blair, and David Cameron, too, you got on with. Again, that seems to point back to personal relationships—that it is down to the individuals in both Governments to take a collaborative view, whether they are motivated by independence or avoiding it, and to work together, rather than to the actual mechanism.

Alex Salmond: I saw something in evidence from your colleague, Lord Wallace—I was not sure whether it was written or oral evidence—



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Chair: He came before the Committee.

Alex Salmond: Right. He said something like he did not think that the JMC planning meetings were effective. In one of the meetings, Tony Blair was staring out the window—the phrase struck me. I was puzzled by that, because if I had been meeting Tony Blair, he might have been jumping out the window, but he certainly would not be staring out the window.

I remember at my first meeting with Gordon—and with David Cameron, later—the point of the whole agenda was, “This needs solved”, “That needs solved”, and we got quite a bit of the way down the list, before they started saying, “Gie us peace!” I find that difficult, because I know—I was an Opposition leader and back here at the time—plenty of issues were going on.

In my opinion, it was much more that Tony Blair was not particularly interested in that sort of thing. He had other things in mind—countries to invade, and that sort of stuff—and there is no question but that when Gordon Brown came in, there was a sea change in attitude and re-establishment of the committees. Things got a bit tense as we approached the election of 2010, with political rivalries, but when David Cameron got in, he was extremely keen on establishing that sort of relationship and demonstrating that it was possible.

I will give you one very good example. I was talking about Jim Wallace, and he and I as Opposition MPs down here, pursued for many years that Scottish Ministers should be at the Council of Ministers in Europe. Fishing was usually the subject where things came to a head. At the first meeting I had with David Cameron, which would have been after the 2010 election, I raised that perennial issue and pointed out that a Fisheries Council meeting was about to occur on pelagic fishing where—as you will know well, David—Scotland had about 90% of the catching capacity while the other boats, the three English boats at that time, were all Dutch owned. Scotland basically had all the UK interest—I think there might have been one boat in Northern Ireland at the time as well. Yet Richard Lochhead was not even guaranteed to be at the meeting, never mind leading the delegation. David Cameron and William Hague at our meeting agreed that Richard Lochhead would lead the UK delegation for the issue of pelagic fishing. I do not think it was unprecedented—I think it had happened once before in the dim and distant past—but it was a fairly spectacular breakthrough as far as the fishing industry was concerned.

It should be said that thereafter DEFRA launched a counter-offensive—if I can put it that way—and started to chip away at the idea that that would happen on a regular basis. None the less, it was a good example. Now, you would never have got that from a meeting of officials; that had to be a prime ministerial and Foreign Secretary decision. But that happened at the first plenary meeting shortly after the election—

Chair: Sorry, on the issue of fishing, there is a supplementary from Mr Duguid, if you don't mind, Christine, or do you want to pursue this first?



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Q244 **Christine Jardine:** I would like to pursue this first. From what you are telling the Committee, you believe that those meetings were incredibly useful and were used for settling issues such as that, which you do not believe could have been settled effectively in other ways.

Alex Salmond: Absolutely correct. That is the sort of thing that has to be settled by prime ministerial fiat.

Q245 **Christine Jardine:** It was important that everyone had a positive attitude to them.

Alex Salmond: Agreed. My experience was that if most people in politics—most people, not everybody—can do something without great detriment to their own position, their attitude would be, “If we have established decent relationships, why not do it?”

Q246 **Christine Jardine:** The problem I have with that, if you do not mind me saying, is that from my research and my personal memory of the time that was not the feeling, particularly in the UK Government, about many of these meetings. In fact, in May 2012 there was a great deal of press coverage about the fact that the UK Government were unhappy that you had chosen to go to make a speech in Aberdeen, rather than coming to the JMC that all the other First Ministers were coming to, and they were critical of your attitude. You mentioned earlier that the elderly tend to look back, the young look forwards and the middle-aged look around. Do you think, looking back on those years, you are looking at them slightly through rose-tinted glasses? Are you not appreciating that it was not quite the golden age that you think and more could have been done?

Alex Salmond: My memory of it seems to chime reasonably well with that of David Cameron, which I suppose are the two accounts that really matter on this. Obviously, politics doesn't stop. In terms of attendance at JMC meetings, I don't know if I would have got the gold star, but I would certainly have got the silver star or better. There were the British-Irish Council meetings as well, because they were great opportunities for Scotland to progress our case in a whole range of ways.

Politics doesn't come to a halt just because an institution is re-established, but what I think happens are needless arguments. Arguments that don't have to be there can get removed from the agenda; to a certain extent, these are beyond politics. I have mentioned Rhodri Morgan a number of times already, but his bugbear about the Olympics spending really stuck in his craw. The fact that he was a Labour politician did not alter the fact that he was determined to get what he saw as the just share for Wales from infrastructure spending, come what may.

Q247 **Christine Jardine:** Given all that, you believe that it was successful. You believe that re-establishing the JMC worked, the meetings worked; David Cameron recognised that they worked and, as Prime Minister, saw the opportunity to ensure a good, positive relationship with Scotland from Westminster to the benefit of the people of Scotland. I think it was Lord Browne who said yesterday that everybody was in it because they wanted the best for Scotland. Why do you think, by your own statement earlier



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on, we are no longer in a golden age of relations between the UK and Scottish Governments? We still have the JMC, but why is it no longer working effectively, by your own admission, for both the Governments and the people of Scotland, who ultimately are the losers if there is a bad relationship between the two Governments?

Alex Salmond: The stresses and strains from Brexit and covid. I was impressed by the fairness of Bernard Jenkin's Committee on this. I think most observers would say that when it came to Brexit and its aftermath, to be fair, it would be very difficult to build up a relationship with any single Prime Minister, if we remember the progression. One of the Prime Ministers who actually campaigned on the issue was not going to speak to the Scottish First Minister at the time. The Brexit issue put particular strains on things, but the underlying thing here is that other issues are used as boundary disputes.

One of the reasons that myself and your colleagues Alistair Carmichael and Jim Wallace used to argue for the removal of the Secretary of State is that the Secretary of State was supernumerary to the relationships between the UK Departments, the JMC process, the Cabinet Office and the Prime Minister and was getting in the way. That even happened when John Reid was the Secretary of State and Donald Dewar was the First Minister; they were engaged in a fairly ferocious battle at one stage. It would therefore be much better for the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Governments to deal directly.

One of the very few things I agreed with Tony Blair on is that at one point he wanted to establish a Secretary of State for constitutional affairs and remove the territorial aspect of things. I think boundary disputes are what cause the acrimony. It was generally supposed that, after the withdrawal from the European Union, the UK Government would fairly and automatically devolve areas of European regeneration spending, unless there was some particular aspect. As I understand it, what has basically happened, has it not, is that most of that spending has been accumulated in Whitehall, and is now directed on things that the devolved Administrations would traditionally have seen themselves as responsible for.

Q248 **Christine Jardine:** So it is all the UK Government's fault.

Alex Salmond: No, I didn't say that it was all the UK Government. I am just saying that in recent years it looks to me, and it looked to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, that the actions of the UK Government have advanced into the other side's turf. I am just observing things. I also think that in the absence of an agreed process—in what we are referring to as the golden age, there was an agreed process in the Edinburgh Agreement—what is required is an agreed process by which the constitutional aim can be properly, democratically pursued.

Q249 **Christine Jardine:** A proper dispute resolution mechanism.

Alex Salmond: The dispute resolution mechanism that was established in 2010 worked very well. As I mentioned, five disputes went to it, and only



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one went the full way, because the various sides dropped theirs when they realised they were going to get beaten. As I remember it, the only one that went the full hog was the Olympic regeneration money.

Q250 Christine Jardine: If we put aside the Olympic regeneration thing, what I am taking from what you are saying is that, for good relations between the Scottish and the UK Governments and for devolution to work effectively, we need people on both sides who want it to work and have a motivation for making it work, and a dispute resolution mechanism, and for us all to forget boundary disputes.

Alex Salmond: Yes. I read, as you will have, the new format. It is there. There is a dispute mechanism and a secretariat as well. But it looks pretty complicated, doesn't it? I mean, just as an observation—

Q251 Christine Jardine: Full of diagrams again.

Alex Salmond: Yes, but none the less there is a dispute mechanism. But the key dispute resolution mechanism is the one that Alan Brown referred to: finding a dispute mechanism with the Treasury is probably more important than any other dispute mechanism.

Chair: Mr Duguid, I know it was several minutes ago, but if you still want to have your very brief supplementary question, you can.

Q252 David Duguid: It is just a single question. Mr Salmond, you mentioned fisheries earlier. I am the current Member of Parliament for Banff and Buchan and you are the recovering Member for Banff and Buchan and still a resident, so I guess it is inevitable that fisheries might come up. I recognised what you said about the difficulty of people getting into the room. When the UK was a member state of the EU, the frustration was often expressed that even UK Government Ministers and negotiators could not get into the room, particularly for annual coastal state negotiations.

On that basis, would you agree with Elspeth Macdonald, the chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, who stated in evidence to this Committee that since the UK has left the EU and CFP and become an independent coastal state, the strength and power of Scottish Government negotiators in those negotiations has actually never been so strong?

Alex Salmond: Well, what is the optimum position for Scottish fishing? The optimum position is to control the resource and to have guaranteed access to markets. When the common fisheries policy was in sway—I am sure that you will remember my views on the common fisheries policy—you had untrammelled and guaranteed access to markets, but the resource was not controlled. Currently, as you say, the resource is controlled in the UK, but the access to markets can be questioned and can be questionable. If there was a point of dispute, it could be undermined.

If we look at the Norwegian situation, Norway both controls the resource and has access to markets. My own view is that, from a fisheries point of view, that would be the optimum position. I hope and believe that—no



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doubt with your urging and campaigning, because, as you will understand, my former fishing constituents are still very dear to me, as they will be to you—the situation is progressive and they are having their vital economic—

Q253 **David Duguid:** Forgive me, but the question was whether you agree with Elspeth Macdonald that the Scottish fishing industry should have a stronger voice in the annual coastal state negotiations.

Alex Salmond: I hope they get the results they are looking for. I read "Fishing News", as you do, and I have been reading about a range of issues at the present moment that look problematic. On the pelagic side, incidentally—

David Duguid: Can I push you on a yes or no? Do you agree with Elspeth Macdonald?

Alex Salmond: I would love to agree with the SFF, but I would have to study the matter to say. I see issues unresolved still in the fishing industry, but no doubt, with your endeavours, they will come to a beneficial conclusion.

Chair: You didn't do too badly—we will leave it there.

Q254 **Ms Qaisar:** Thank you, Alex, for joining us today. If I reflect on my own experiences of growing up in Scotland, there have been times when foreign policy has come to the forefront of politics: the Iraq war comes to mind, and of course you were incredibly vocal against that, as were many in Scotland. In your view, how did that policy impact how Scots felt represented at Westminster, and how did it impact intergovernmental relations?

Alex Salmond: The Iraq war was before I was First Minister, but you are quite right that the reverberations from the disputes in Iraq have continued through politics to this day; obviously, the situation in Gaza is also a huge concern and a very pertinent issue in this Parliament right now. There is no doubt that it does have an impact; I don't know whether Tony Blair liked me before Iraq, but he certainly never liked me afterwards, so it has an impact on interpersonal relationships.

In the letter I was talking about—the one that I thought was very atypical of David Cameron—he talks about how it is vital that the UK has a single position, but the UK doesn't have a single position. I understand it, and I understand that there may be a difference in Sir Keir Starmer's position in upcoming votes than there has been, or a slight change—however he wants to describe it. That is not my point. It is expected that Sir Keir Starmer will always have the same position as the Government. If Humza Yousaf meets another foreign leader, will that foreign leader be unaware that Humza Yousaf might have a different position from the UK Government? What is to be gained or added to by saying that the UK must have a single position, when manifestly the UK does not, either in terms of parties or of Administrations, have a single position?



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Foreign leaders are quite able to make the distinction between a devolved Government and the UK Government at Westminster. You don't have to send in your First Minister with a gag in his mouth, telling him not to speak out of turn like a naughty boy. That is not required. We should be much more relaxed about people having different positions. But you are quite right that these issues can reverberate through politics for a long time. I suspect the current tragedy in Gaza is going to reverberate through politics. It is not particularly a failure of UK leadership, although it is that; it is a failure of world leadership that this situation has been allowed to develop in the way it has.

Q255 Ms Qaisar: Thank you for talking about Gaza, because that is exactly what I was going to go on to. There are no words to describe the situation: we have seen over 28,000 people—including women and children—killed by Israeli authorities. People across all four nations have engaged in the political process and my inbox is full of my Airdrie and Shotts constituents, who are furious at Westminster for not reflecting their views. There has also been conversation at Westminster—you may have heard it—about pro-ceasefire marches being banned or restricted, yet of course in the Scottish Parliament we had a vote on this matter. Following on from what I asked previously, what should happen, moving forward, in terms of politicians being able to work together? We are clearly seeing two Governments and two Parliaments with very different attitudes when it comes to the duration of Gaza.

Alex Salmond: To take the analogy of the Iraq war, one of the best early debates in the Scots Parliament was the debate on Iraq. It was one of the times when the Parliament was able to lift itself from some of the issues that had preoccupied the early days of the Parliament—like the building and all the rest of it—on to a different level. It was absolutely superb. I remember a speech by George Reid, which was compelling. We shouldn't be frightened of these issues. On the contrary, they have to be articulated and articulated well. The conference I have just returned from in Berlin was—not preoccupied with this issue alone, but obviously it was a major part of it.

Nobody can take credit in the world at the present moment for their overall attitude, but some people have stood out. I thought Uachtarán Higgins in his willingness, for a small country in Europe, to say to the European President that her attitude was not shared across the European Union in the early stages of this was a very important statement. People should speak out because they should do their best to reflect the popular will, and the popular will not just in this country, not just in Scotland, but across the world is to stop the slaughter in Gaza. More strength to the elbow of everybody who is doing that. Also, on restrictions, I remember there was legislation to restrict marches round the Scots Parliament that I never understood. It was ridiculous—

Chair: Sorry, Alex. Just before we go on, Members can ask any question they like, and it is interesting to hear Mr Salmond's recollections and views about such issues, but I gently remind colleagues that we are here to hear his experiences of 25 years of devolution.



Q256 **Ms Qaisar:** Thank you, Chair, for that reminder. Alex, you spearheaded the Scottish international offices across the globe and, as we have spoken about today, recent Foreign Secretaries have outlined their concerns that the Scottish Government is stepping out of line. If foreign policy is set at Westminster, why did you think it was so important that Scotland's interests were represented on that global stage, and were concerns raised by Westminster?

Alex Salmond: Some concerns were raised, but of course many of the issues that these offices had as a priority—the trade ministry, International Trade—impacted substantially on the Parliament's responsibilities in Scotland. They were focused mainly on trade, as well as the promotion of Scotland internationally.

We can take the example of China. The deal I signed with Premier Li Keqiang in Scotland was for access to the Chinese market for Scots salmon, which is a huge part of the export of Scots salmon now. Also, there was PetroChina's investment in Grangemouth, which at that time secured the future of the plant. Incidentally, an early benefit of the relationship with Gordon Brown that was established was the joint initiative to save Grangemouth in 2008.

These offices impacted substantially on Scots responsibilities. Of course, we have recognised for many years, even before devolution, that the more you signpost the Scottish aspect of investment and trade, the better. Scotland has a substantial, very positive international reputation—some of it deserved, some of it we're just lucky about, I think. None the less, that is the situation, so the more you maximise that, the better. That was understood even before devolution and understood by Henry McLeish, one of my predecessors. He was very strong on this issue, and I took it further, absolutely. That was to the vast benefit—I don't think many Scottish businesses wouldn't say it was money well spent and that the initiatives weren't appreciated.

Q257 **Ms Qaisar:** Finally, it is argued that there are differing needs in Scotland and England. One thing that comes to mind is immigration. Yet here in Westminster we have seen xenophobic immigration policies pushed forward, and yet in Scotland we are crying out for immigration. What dialogue, if any, did you have as First Minister with Westminster Government officials in relation to policies like immigration being devolved to the Scottish Parliament?

Alex Salmond: The key discourse was on the graduate retention scheme—the ability to work for a period after graduation—which we firstly won, got, retained, and then was challenged and eventually lost. I remember that there were also disputes about the treatment of asylum seekers at Dungavel, which was a significant issue. The graduate one—obviously, it was not the whole ambit of immigration. In my view, we were not going to get Westminster to concede a separate immigration policy for Scotland, desirable as that would have been for Scotland. None the less, the issue of graduates' ability to work in Scotland post-graduation was very key, and it was one that was recognised by the Labour Administration



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before me. Unfortunately, the Home Office started to encroach very heavily on that scheme.

It was a huge issue at that time, but of course with European Union migration into Scotland fulfilling many vital roles, it is an even more pertinent issue at present. The Scottish economy has a number of great problems and issues at the present moment, but one of the greatest is the access to labour supply in certain key industries. As MPs, each and every one of you must have constituent companies reminding you of that.

Michael Shanks: Thank you, Mr Salmond. As well as your evidence today, when I read your evidence in 2010 it struck me that, although you maybe did not always agree with UK Ministers, there was a willingness to make it work. You have said a number of things today about “over things that mattered”, “co-operate when you can” and various others. There was obviously always a willingness, although you might disagree, to make devolution work. Do you think your successors have followed the same path?

Alex Salmond: Because I was not in the room, I do not know where—I deliberately cited Bernard Jenkin’s Committee because that was a cross-party Committee’s unanimous report. I think that for the institutions, in the post-referendum period, there wasn’t the same incentive that Christine and I were discussing, perhaps. The particular Brexit and covid issues caused great tensions. There is probably an issue as well that the generation of devolved parliamentarians and Government Ministers familiar with this place has largely passed. I think that that familiarity helped. Knowing how this place works, not just in parliamentary terms but the decision making in Whitehall, is an enormous advantage. For all those reasons, I think clearly—but whatever the rights and wrongs, the evidence points to the Brexit period in particular, and the relationships of successive Prime Ministers in that period, as being one of great difficulty.

Q258 **Michael Shanks:** May I push you on that a bit, though? You have commented on a number of things today that you were not in the room for, and you know your successors very well, although there is perhaps not quite as good a relationship now. Do you think they have the same approach you had to devolution about making it work, or do you think they were actually more interested in proving that it does not work?

Alex Salmond: I cannot conceive that any First Minister of Scotland, who was interested in Scottish independence, would not want both to do their absolute best in running the devolved Parliament and Administration and to agree as many things as possible in terms of inter-Government relations. I do not think there is any premium on not agreeing positive things. I think success breeds success, and that was my attitude. I have known Humza Yousaf for many years and he is a positive person, and I am sure that that is the attitude that he wants to strike up.

I do hope that when David Cameron and Humza Yousaf have their first meeting, they can sit down and talk about how they direct letters to each



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other. David Cameron would never, ever have written me a letter like that, or written it to some proxy. I cannae believe that Humza Yousaf is responsible for that deterioration of relationships, since he has only been in office for a year and David Cameron had only been in office for a week.

Q259 Michael Shanks: I am keen to come back on that question in a minute, but I just want to keep you on the issue of relationships. You specifically stated in 2010, and again today, that particularly in big moments of national crisis, Government could work very well. I think you said then that when minds were concentrated on a major issue, there was co-operation.

Obviously, the biggest major issue we've had in recent years has been the covid situation. Evidence was given to the covid inquiry, although not as much as there should have been, that senior advisers in the Sturgeon Government saw it as an opportunity for a "rammy" on the constitution. If you had been First Minister during the covid pandemic, would you have carried out Government in the way that the Sturgeon Government did?

Alex Salmond: I certainly would not have had that person anywhere near being a senior adviser. The person you are talking about is Liz Lloyd. It struck me that probably the most revealing thing I saw in that was that somehow, amid all the missing WhatsApp messages, one message that somehow managed to be miraculously retained was the one that referred to Boris Johnson as an expletive deleted "clown".

Now, listen—your constituents, my old constituents and many people might agree with that, but I cannot believe that the covid relatives watching that inquiry wanted to hear that, or for that matter the Scottish Secretary addressing things in the way he did in giving his evidence. The last thing that covid relatives want to hear is what politicians think about each other; what they want to hear about is what they actually did to address things. As far as that particular case is concerned, that particular person would not have been within a thousand miles of being a senior adviser.

Q260 Michael Shanks: On that exact point about messages being retained, I appreciate that you were in Government in a period when WhatsApp was not quite such a key part of our day-to-day life, but electronic messaging was, in different forms. Did you retain any of your messages from that period? Are you surprised about how few have been retained by the current Government?

Alex Salmond: I was interested to hear that some people claim those practices date back to 2007—to delete messages. That is the first I have heard of it. I actually checked with Kenny MacAskill and Alex Neil—two Ministers at the time—whether they had ever heard of that policy and they hadn't heard of it either.

I conducted everything through my private office, not because I wasn't—no, actually, probably because I wasn't that electronically savvy at the time. I think I first had WhatsApp in 2017, or something like that, so it



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was a bit after I left office. But I conducted everything through my private office, or in personal contact—phone calls or whatever.

Actually, with your indulgence, Chair, I will say that I used to get very annoyed at the informality of emails. I had a whole succession at one point—not particularly important issues, but of FOIs—that showed civil servants emailing each other about the football results. It was harmless enough stuff. So I said to John Elvidge, “What would be the chances of banning emails in the Scottish Government?” And Sir John said that that it would perhaps be a bit adventurous to ban them totally, but perhaps we could have a pilot in one of the Departments.

Sir John organised a pilot, somewhere in the historic monuments section, I think, with three people in it. We weren’t being entirely serious, but I was just trying to get across the fact that I did not think it was a great idea for civil servants in official correspondence to be talking about—hopefully Hearts beating Hibs, but if it was Hibs beating Hearts—

Chair: Just one more time, if I may. This is all very interesting and even amusing, but we are trying to stick to 25 years of devolution and Mr Salmond’s accounts thereof.

Q261 **Michael Shanks:** The reason I am asking the question is obviously because part of the importance of intergovernmental relations is how we communicate with each other and the methods that are used. I am asking these questions because, of course, there has been a wholesale deletion of messages, so that intergovernmental communication during the pandemic is very hard to figure out, because there are huge parts of the records that do not exist. And I am asking Mr Salmond—

Alex Salmond: I would—

Michael Shanks: Can I finish the question, Mr Salmond? Obviously, I am not asking you to account for Nicola Sturgeon’s messages, but I am asking you whether, in your time in office, you retained any of the messages between your Ministers. Of course, Humza Yousaf and Nicola Sturgeon were both Ministers in that Government, so what was the retention policy then?

Alex Salmond: There was no policy for deletion, as I have already told you, and I was surprised to hear John Swinney and Nicola Sturgeon say that there was, or that they had been advised—but who knows? Maybe a civil servant did say that to them. But not to my knowledge—there was certainly no policy in my Administration for deletion of messages on the basis that we heard about during the covid inquiry.

I myself did not use informal messaging at all, because I felt that I had a private office and that was what I should do. I felt the best form of communication in terms of intergovernmental relations—the subject of your inquiry—was on the phone or in person, which is why I wanted to re-establish the JMCs. I thought you could get an enormous amount more done in a room, talking to people and explaining your concerns, than you would sending endless cross-letters or memos to each other, even official



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ones. There was no deletion from me, and I am not aware of any deletion policy, as was suggested, back to 2007. It certainly was not one that I practised.

Q262 **Michael Shanks:** Finally, I want to come back to what you said in your evidence today about the letter from David Cameron to Humza Yousaf on international meetings. You now have a commercial arrangement with TRT, which might be a conflict of interest on this issue given that it has been called a mouthpiece of the Erdoğan Government. You mentioned a meeting you had with a Chinese Minister, and you said you had absolutely no issue whatsoever with an official from the FCDO being present—indeed, you said you were quite happy for them to join you.

Alex Salmond: The British ambassador.

Q263 **Michael Shanks:** Isn't the issue with the Humza Yousaf situation that he did not tell the FCDO about the meeting, and therefore no official could be present?

Alex Salmond: First, I have nothing to declare. I have no commercial relationship with President Erdoğan that I am aware of. I produce—sorry, I present television programmes for TRT, but that is not a commercial relationship with President Erdoğan, as far as I am aware. My remarks would equally apply to the Prime Minister of Iceland, who I have met, I think, but I am not in a commercial relationship with her either. I was trying to make a policy point.

I think David Cameron was wrong. The letter was extraordinarily atypical of what I remember of David's attitude to things. I have nourished the hope that it was written for his predecessor and he was assigned it and did not really realise what he was saying. The official I was talking about was the British ambassador in China at that time. I was trying to be helpful to him on requests for getting him into the leadership compound so that he could do his job as British ambassador. The reasons I did that were that it was a good thing, there was no detriment to me or Scotland in doing it, and I would probably—and did—get reciprocation from the Foreign Office at various times. But the idea that I would have asked permission to meet, let's say, the President of the European Commission, Hillary Clinton or the whole variety of other world leaders, and would only be able to meet them if I was chaperoned by an FCDO official—it would not even be countenanced.

Why we have got to this situation that the Foreign Office is so petrified of what Humza Yousaf might say to the Prime Minister of Iceland, I have got absolutely no idea. As we discussed with Anum Qaisar, it is a self-defeating business. It is almost as self-defeating as Tony Blair trying to ban the one-man protest on the Iraq war outside Parliament. You cannot stop Humza Yousaf thinking as he does about Gaza—if indeed he was discussing Gaza, as opposed to climate change. Plus, as I understand it, that meeting was at a climate change summit in Dubai. Climate change is a devolved responsibility. In fact, one of the few arguments I had with Gordon Brown was about not allowing a Scottish Government Minister as

part of the UK delegation at the Copenhagen summit given that we had just passed the most adventurous, positive climate change legislation in the world in 2009-10.

All I am saying is that it seems to me, looking at that letter, that there must be something more to it than meets the eye, because nobody would send such a petty and ridiculous letter unless there was some back story to it. The idea of threatening, as that letter does, to withdraw facilities from embassies around the world—in other words, damaging trade and investment in Scotland—is totally out of any proportion to whatever offence Humza Yousaf has caused somebody by meeting the Prime Minister of Iceland.

Michael Shanks: You know Lord Cameron better than me. As MPs, we cannot question him on that matter anyway, because we are not able to question a Member of the House of Lords.

Alex Salmond: Have a word with Baron Foulkes!

Q264 **Michael Shanks:** You talked about the arm-wrestling bouts that have come to symbolise the more recent period of devolution. I wonder if that is related to what you just said about how relationships have broken down to the point where a letter like that is sent. Generally, looking at your relationship versus where we are now, do you think there have been failures on both sides in trying to make that work?

Alex Salmond: There may well have been failures on both sides; I have not been inside the room to find out. I have referred to this, and I will again: if a House of Commons Committee says, as Bernard Jenkin's Committee did, "Look, Westminster, on Brexit, was operating outside of reasonable boundaries," I think that you should pay attention to that.

I do not know what the back story is behind the Cameron letter, but that letter was published. It is like a reprimand to a naughty schoolboy. I am hoping that Humza Yousaf can have an early meeting with David Cameron, and I am hoping that David Cameron will be as amenable and positive as he was on non-party political matters with me 10 years ago, because I see no benefit whatsoever in trying to gag the First Minister of Scotland, or trying to restrict who he meets and who he doesn't meet.

Q265 **Wendy Chamberlain:** It is a pleasure to speak with you for the first time. I just wanted to pick up, first of all, on Christine Jardine's observations that relationships are actually really important to make this work. The previous IGR system was criticised for being dominated by the UK Government. If Tony Blair had continued as Prime Minister after you became First Minister, do you think that you would have seen the improvements in intergovernmental relations that you described that followed on?

Alex Salmond: No.

Wendy Chamberlain: No—as simple as that. So if the Prime Minister didn't want it to work, it wouldn't have worked?



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Alex Salmond: I don't think that it was purely—I mean, by that stage, as Anum Qaisar rightly observed, Iraq created many personal tensions, but I don't think that Prime Minister Blair, at that stage, at the very end of his prime ministership, was at all interested in the internal mechanics of devolution. Was it written evidence that the former Prime Minister's office gave to you?

Chair: Written evidence, yes.

Alex Salmond: I have looked at that and I thought, you know, this is—I was going to say "delusional". It's not anything resembling reality. I do not think that the then Prime Minister had any interest whatsoever in the devolved arrangements. I think that Gordon Brown, for reasons of history, did, as did David Cameron, for reasons of politics, perhaps, but also because I found him very amenable.

People look at this and say, "Well, why are you agreeing with that one or that one?" People have political differences and different hopes for the future of Scotland—I believe in independence; they didn't—but lots of things can be solved that are not about the future of Scotland. They are about the future of a job, or the future of a factory, or the future of a fishing deal, which you should get on and do, and I don't think Tony Blair was at all interested. Perhaps he felt—like in some of the evidence you've received—that everything was being done by old chums together.

I saw Lord Murphy, a very amenable guy who Gordon Brown appointed to make that sort of point. My point is that clearly, things weren't working in 2007. Certainly, with the plenary sessions, if the Prime Minister is not prepared to go, they won't happen, and for five years, they didn't happen. But I think that, once you got them going, the issues were very interesting for the Prime Ministers, for one reason or another.

So the answer to the question, "If Blair had stayed"—that would have been the least of our worries, mind you—"would he have done what Gordon Brown and David Cameron did?" is "No, probably not".

Q266 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Ultimately, what I am coming back to is the acknowledgment—from your responses to Christine Jardine—that, actually, those relationships, and that willingness, are key, regardless of what the structures were, which reflects some of the conversation we had yesterday.

Alex Salmond: Yes, although the structures are important in terms of providing the rules.

Wendy Chamberlain: Particularly from an official perspective.

Alex Salmond: As a Member of Parliament, you want to put forward your views and you want to look for opportunities. You find your opportunities within the rules of the House of Commons—the rules of debate and the rules of questioning, and therefore the rules and the framework of the intergovernmental association. But there is also the willingness to do it,



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you are quite right, and the parity of esteem by which people should be held.

Q267 Wendy Chamberlain: It is good that you have come on to that parity of esteem, because you mentioned it in 2010—14 years ago—and you have mentioned it today. You have talked about the parity of esteem regarding intergovernmental relations, but I would be interested to know your views on parity of esteem regarding inter-parliamentary relations, because you have already talked about the fact that, as time went on, people, potentially in different Parliaments, had less experience or knowledge of the other.

Alex Salmond: I didn't put this forward as a proposal at the time, but I am sure that you are going to look at it as a Committee. People have talked about me, as First Minister, appearing before that Committee, and perhaps the Prime Minister or Ministers appearing before the Scots Parliament. I wonder whether a model you might want to look at is the British-Irish Council, which has a parliamentary aspect to it. It is only a proposal, but it is not inter-parliamentary relations in the sense of the Prime Minister appearing before a Scottish Committee, or the First Committee appearing before this or other House of Commons Committees—I had no objection to doing that, obviously.

The British-Irish Council is an incredibly useful body, in my opinion. In my experience, the Taoiseach went to every single one. The Prime Minister went to some but not all, but for the Taoiseach it was a huge thing, and rightly so, because you got some great stuff done. There was a parliamentary aspect of that, which you perhaps might want to look at as a model.

Q268 Wendy Chamberlain: You said in 2010—it is in the transcript—that you were more than happy to come before this Committee, and you are obviously here today as a former First Minister, but we have seen a breakdown in appearances at Committees. Former First Minister Sturgeon did not appear throughout my time on this Committee, and Mr Yousaf has also said that he will not appear. What are your views on that, given that the Committee structure in Westminster, which you know well, has a very important role to play in scrutiny of the UK Government?

Alex Salmond: Let us address Humza. I understand that the argument, as stated, is, "Look, my first duty is to be responsible to the Scots Parliament"—

Wendy Chamberlain: Yes, but Mark Drakeford felt differently in relation to Welsh affairs.

Alex Salmond: I was about to sort of agree with you, Wendy. I did not see then, and I do not see now, any difficulty in that. Look, you would not expect the First Minister to appear before a Westminster Committee every two weeks—that would be ridiculous—but once a year would not be a problem. I do not see that you are diminishing your key responsibility. If a political leader goes to address the European Parliament, of course it doesn't diminish his accountability or his responsibility to his home



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Parliament. As long as they are not unreasonable demands—as long as the First Minister is not summoned every time there is a crisis—I don't see any difficulty.

I do think that a slightly different structure of committee might be helpful with that sort of stuff. As opposed to Scottish Affairs, it might be more of an intergovernmental affairs committee or something like that. That might help along the way.

Q269 **Wendy Chamberlain:** We come back to constitutional affairs, as the Secretary of State has suggested.

Alex Salmond: And as many of your party colleagues have argued for over the years; I have supported them avidly. I used to sit in front of Alistair Carmichael and nod vigorously on the many occasions when he made the point about how much money and time it would save and how everybody would get on much better.

Q270 **Wendy Chamberlain:** It sounds to me that when this Committee is looking at particular things—for example, the impact of the cost of living on rural communities—it is not unreasonable to ask the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs to appear in front of this Committee.

Alex Salmond: Of course it is not. As long as the requests are reasonable and his or her first priority is to the Scots Parliament, I don't see any difficulty in that, nor vice versa.

Wendy Chamberlain: Absolutely. Indeed, the Chair of this Committee has engaged with Sir Bernard Jenkin, in his role as Liaison Committee Chair, to look at how we can better improve those relations.

Alex Salmond: You have been engaging with Bernard Jenkin?

Chair: Indeed. I am hopeful that we will have a serving First Minister appear in front of this Committee. There is no lack of effort to secure that.

Q271 **Douglas Ross:** Following on from Michael Shanks's question about the covid inquiry and the deletion policy or otherwise, you have been very clear in your evidence to this Committee that there was no such policy in your time leading the Government. Under oath, both John Swinney and Nicola Sturgeon said that it had been a policy since they entered government. You appointed them both to your first Cabinet in 2007. Based on that point alone and your view, is it your opinion that John Swinney and Nicola Sturgeon lied under oath to the covid inquiry?

Alex Salmond: Well, that is a matter for the covid inquiry and the Information Commissioner to investigate, but let me be quite clear: I am not aware of any such policy. I would have thought I would have had to sign off a policy.

Looking at what John said—I looked at this in some detail—he seemed to be referring to some advice he had from his civil servants or private office. It is possible that there was such advice through a private office, but there



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was certainly no general Government policy and nothing I signed off. I was totally unaware of it.

Because I found it surprising, as I say, I phoned up—there is the case that you forget things. As I have already said, I did not have an issue with this, because I did not conduct any business in that fashion as First Minister. I thought that was the whole point of having this panoply of folk who did all your work for you, so I did everything through the private office.

I would have had to sign off if there had been a general policy. It is possible they were specifically advised by somebody or other, so they may well say that, but that is for them to clarify and it is for the covid inquiry to find out—perhaps the Information Commissioner.

Q272 Douglas Ross: A lot of what we have heard today, and indeed in reading your preamble to the session in the Sunday papers, is blame on other people where you feel there had been failings and deficiencies in terms of how intergovernmental relations have worked. In your reflections, have you looked at any point in your seven years as First Minister and your other time in elected office to see areas where you could have done better to improve those intergovernmental relations? Is there anything that in hindsight makes you think that actually your actions or the actions of your Government hampered some of those intergovernmental relations?

Alex Salmond: Given that they did not exist in a formal structure, or they had been in abeyance—let us put it that way—for five years, and then they were re-established and established more when the coalition Government came in 2010, that was progress. I would not say that at every single meeting I always said the best possible things, but we did our best to establish a structure and we got results from that. The weight of evidence that I have seen that you have received tends to support that position.

There was a period when the mechanisms were in place. Did these mechanisms always work perfectly? No, they did not. I was very disappointed about not getting a Scottish Minister going as part of the UK delegation to the Copenhagen summit, given that we had climate change legislation. I was disappointed that there was opposition to Scotland having the executive of the British-Irish Council—an issue, incidentally, that I could never understand and that was resolved after the 2010 elections.

There were some things that were not working well enough, but there was a lot of progress made. Nothing is perfect, but it was pretty positive. Alan Brown mentioned something that was crucial in terms of the finances of Scotland, which was the flexibility over the underspend and overspend, which made financial management of Scotland much better than it had previously been.

Q273 Douglas Ross: I am just struck that again, in that answer, it is disappointment at other people's lack of action or work. I am not just looking at processes. You were First Minister for seven years. You held



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that role and you won elections. Is there nothing that you look back on and think, "My conduct, my time in office and decisions of my Government could have made a more positive impact"?

Alex Salmond: If you are asking whether I have any regrets, my regret is that Scotland did not vote for independence on 18 September 2014. That is my key regret in politics.

Douglas Ross: I am just wondering about your regret—

Alex Salmond: Perhaps I could have expressed the case better, and perhaps that would have come to realisation.

Douglas Ross: But nothing in your time as First Minister?

Alex Salmond: I was trying to address your point about the intergovernmental relations.

Douglas Ross: I am saying we can be wider than that.

Alex Salmond: Yes, but that is not the subject of your Committee. We can have a confession at some other time.

Douglas Ross: There are a number of things that were not the subject of our Committee that you have been happy to answer.

Chair: I am making my best efforts to try and keep it about this, please.

Alex Salmond: In terms of re-establishing intergovernmental committees, I think that the mechanism of dispute resolution affecting the Treasury was not as effective as it could have been. I regret we did not manage to get there.

I would say, however, that many Government Departments down here through the ages have probably felt that as well from various Cabinet Star Chambers and things. I do not think we got as far on dispute resolution on finances as we would have liked. I don't know if this new arrangement is going to help, but the point I made earlier about the constriction on the Scottish budget is a huge one—it really, really is. I see no debate about this in the Scots Parliament; I see no interest in it. I know that these things are not as attractive in terms of political debate as some other issues are, but it is a great issue at the present moment, and hopefully this new structure will allow the Scottish Government to pursue it to better effect.

Q274 **Douglas Ross:** Can I move on to an issue that we have not discussed so far this morning, which is the dual role of the Lord Advocate? Looking at 25 years of devolution and at the role of the Lord Advocate both as head of the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and as a member of the Scottish Government, what is your view?

Alex Salmond: When I took office, as you may know, I withdrew the Law Officers from Cabinet meetings. They only came to Cabinet meetings at their request if there was an issue of law, if they were to offer legal advice



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to the Cabinet on a current issue, or if something had happened that they had to tell us about. After I left office, that was reversed. For reasons I do not know, the Lord Advocate—not Frank Mulholland but his successor—started going back to Cabinet meetings. I have never understood why that was the case, and I do not think it was a good thing to do.

I approve of the idea of separating the prosecutorial service from the legal-advice-to-Government service. Now that the matter has been debated and there have been various consultations, you would expect to see some action for that to happen. I have not seen any coherent arguments for why it should not happen, apart from delay, and there are many reasons why it would be a good idea.

Q275 Douglas Ross: Although the Law Officers did not sit routinely around your Cabinet table, they still had that dual role. Why did you not feel the need to take the decision, which may now come as a result of the consultations and cross-party support, to separate that role?

Alex Salmond: I thought it was enough at that stage to do what I did. They had to be Government Ministers, of course, because they had to be accountable to Parliament. As you are well aware, you can summon a Law Officer to Parliament to answer questions, so it is quite proper and correct that they were Government Ministers. I just did not think that they should be Government Ministers playing at day-to-day politics; they should get on with doing their job in prosecutorial services in Scotland and should only be called to Government for legal advice. I thought that was enough. In retrospect, because it was reversed after I left office, it was not enough. I think an institutional separation would be the most desirable thing to do.

Q276 Douglas Ross: Could there be an opportunity now to go back to how you ran the Cabinet and not have the Law Officers routinely there? I don't sit in Cabinet; I don't know whether they are there under the new First Minister. Would that be enough, or do you think the conflict—the perceived conflict—may now be too much?

Alex Salmond: No, I think various things have happened over the years to suggest that it would be a good idea to make the separation more formal. What are you separating? You are separating the role of Government legal advice from the role of running the prosecution services of Scotland, so there is no suggestion or widespread belief that there is any crossover between the two—between the politics and the prosecution—which seems to be vital for credibility.

There is always an issue in politics of whether things break down or do not work properly because of the individuals involved or because of the systemic nature of things. I think in this case, over recent years, both have been wrong, but the thing you can sort is the organisation of it. I think that the separation would be a positive development.

Q277 Douglas Ross: Earlier, we discussed your having served in both Parliaments. What is your view on changes that could be made? We are now coming into the 25th year of the Scottish Parliament. It was a young Parliament when you and others were first elected in 1999. Have the



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structures within that Parliament worked for Scotland and for democracy, or are there things that we—I am sure we are meeting with the Constitution Committee in Edinburgh in a few weeks' time—should be looking at changing in both Parliaments to improve not only how Government is run, but how parliamentarians can scrutinise Government?

Alex Salmond: As you remember, Douglas, I came into office in a minority Government. We had a plurality of one over Labour; we had, I think, 49 MSPs, counting ourselves and occasionally the two Green Members, in a Parliament of 129. The point I am going to make is that that reflected the whole system of the Parliament. In the first four years, the Committee system was balanced on that basis. That made the Committees pretty vibrant, if you look back in these days.

The Committee system of the Parliament—I do not think this is an original view—is one in particular that has not fulfilled the expectations that it had originally. This is not easy because, as you are well aware, we have 129 Members. It is not that there is a limited pool of talent, but there is a limited pool of people to be members of the Committees, to get the balances right.

I am sure that there could be some innovation. There is one I would like to see: there is a means in the Scots Parliament, as you are well aware, for a Committee to be inquisitorial, as this Committee is being at the present moment, and also legislative. Some way to beef that up would be quite interesting, I think.

This Parliament benefited enormously from Select Committees' effective introduction through Norman St John-Stevas in the Thatcher Government, but the Select Committees came into their own in particular when they were released from Whip appointments and it became a case of elections of Select Committee members—albeit politically reserved—from the whole House. I think that was a good innovation. Television helped enormously with Select Committees, it has to be said. It made people want to be in them. I would say that something on the Committee system would be the key thing.

There is one thing I will say. Whatever difficulties, problems, issues, misfortunes there are after 25 years, people should look back and say that that is a substantial distance to travel in democratic terms. Very few people in Scotland would want to go back to having no Parliament. For most people, the Scottish Parliament is regarded as the place where the key business of Scotland should be discussed. There is an argument about how much of that key business we are talking about—all of it or bits of it. None the less, most people have that view, so we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves, but the Committee system would be my key target for further reform.

Q278 **Douglas Ross:** You have mentioned how challenging it made it for the Government when you had one extra seat, nominally, over Labour. You were then returned in 2011 with an outright majority and could have changed it. Was the fact that it then became simpler for you and your



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Government to have a Government majority on Committees the reason why you didn't change it?

Alex Salmond: No. The reason was that we had a key set of objectives to achieve and a limited time to achieve them.

Committee reform, of course, is not just a matter for a Government initiative, as you are aware; it is a matter for a Parliament. The Parliament has to have a design.

Douglas Ross: It cannot happen without Government backing.

Alex Salmond: You tend not, in manifestos, to say, "We want to reform the Committee system of the Scots Parliament."

Douglas Ross: But as you say, you did in 2007 with the intergovernmental arrangements.

Alex Salmond: You are asking me now, and my reflection now would be that, as most things do over time, the Committee system of the Parliament could merit some attention.

Chair: I remind colleagues that we will try to finish this session at about 12.30 pm. Three Members have indicated that they would still like to ask questions; I know Alan Brown and Christine Jardine have already asked, and David Duguid is to come in. If people are generous with their time, we will make sure that everybody gets in and we will let Mr Salmond get away in good time.

Q279 **Alan Brown:** Alex, you have mentioned the Scotland Office a few times. You have referred to the Lib Dem position, and indeed Alistair Carmichael once called it the most pointless Department in Whitehall—that was before the Lib Dems went into coalition and he saw the light with a ministerial car. Obviously, that crossed over the period when you were First Minister. Were there any Government-to-Government discussions then about the merits of the Scotland Office, whether it should be abolished and what a better system could have been for that and intergovernmental relations?

Alex Salmond: As you probably saw, it was one of my bits of evidence to this Committee 10 years ago. Of course, it was helped by the fact that Alistair Carmichael was sitting there. If I remember right, one of the Committee members objected to my saying that "members" of the Committee held this view, because they thought that you, Chair, were the only person who held this view, but of course I had known Alistair for a number of years on this matter. So at that time there were two members of the Committee who held this view. I suspect there are probably more than that today.

I think, for all the reasons that have been stated, it would be simpler and more effective to abolish the Scotland Office, and to have in Westminster through the Cabinet Office—which I think would be the appropriate place, as it gives you access up the chain to the Prime Minister—a Secretary of



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State for the nations, or however it wants to be described. The description is not as important as the idea. That would basically make sure that the administrative framework, whether it is this new framework of co-operation or whatever, is carried forward properly.

The trouble is that we have individual territorial Secretaries of State. The exception has probably been Northern Ireland, where the job should have been and is to facilitate the resumption of the devolved authority. Now that it is back, they become attempted competitors to the established processes in Scotland. That does not make for good governance or efficient carrying out of affairs. For negotiations that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should have with the Treasury on finance, you could have a committee structured to co-ordinate good governance, with the leaders of the three nations plus the Prime Minister and other Ministers coming to key decisions. That would be a much more effective thing, because otherwise you get into situations of finesse—I never found that a particular problem, it should be said. Some of the Secretaries of State in my term, such as Mr Moore, were very amenable. It is more about the waste of it.

If you take the example that the Secretary of State wants to take charge of development spending in Scotland or whatever, then that is a big intrusion into what should be regarded as part of the key responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament. The same would be the case in Wales. I am trying to remember, but I think all the First Ministers I met from Wales agreed with that position.

Q280 Alan Brown: Far from being abolished, the Scotland Office actually seems more entrenched now. It has 50% more staff now than it did in 2007, but the staff costs budgets have actually gone up tenfold. Is there any likelihood of it being abolished, or this kind of Government change to have a Minister for constitutional affairs? Can you imagine any reason why there is such a disparity now in the number of staff employed with the Scotland Office and staff costs?

Alex Salmond: The likelihood may be less, but the incentive for doing it is surely greater, since there is much more money to be redirected to more useful purposes. I think they are wrong, incidentally. From a Whitehall point of view, they would probably get better co-ordination through the Cabinet Office and through a Minister for the nations. They seem to have both at the present moment. There are Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and there is Michael Gove as well, as I understand it. I do not know if I am misreading things, but he has a ministerial responsibility for intergovernmental relations. I am trying to work this all out. I am not certain that Michael, whose talents everybody is well aware of, is probably the person who will engender the most peaceable co-operation between the various nations of these islands. Of course, the great thing about being a successful Machiavelli is that there is nobody to realise you are a Machiavelli. I am not sure that Michaelvelli has achieved that.

Q281 David Duguid: I know you have come from Munich today, Mr Salmond, but I was about to say thank you for coming all the way down from the



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frozen north of Banff and Buchan. I know what that journey is like. In your introductory remarks, you referred to devolution in three phases. You described the first phase as devolution having broken down, and I think you were talking about when you came into power in 2007. Was that a phenomenon that had already happened before you became First Minister in 2007?

Alex Salmond: It was not devolution that had broken down; it was the intergovernmental relationships—the formal relationships—the Joint Ministerial Committee structure and the things that had been part and parcel of the Scotland Act and envisaged as the means of formal communication. They were in abeyance. For five years, from 2002 to 2007, I think I am right in saying, there had not been a single Plenary meeting of the JMC, which was meant to meet at least once or perhaps twice a year with the First Ministers and the Prime Minister on it. That had vanished, much to the detriment in particular of the devolved Administrations. All the devolved Administrations wanted it back. When Prime Ministers were willing, it came back, and that was a good thing. At the very least that was in abeyance, apart from the European JMC, which I mentioned in the story about Jack Straw. Jack Straw actually told me that as the Foreign Secretary, who was obviously in overall charge of the European JMC, he was under the impression that the other JMCs were working. He thought that they must be working away somewhere, but in fact they were totally in abeyance.

Q282 **David Duguid:** That came about during a time when Labour was in coalition with the Lib Dems in the Scottish Government.

Alex Salmond: Yes.

Q283 **David Duguid:** Also, just to be clear, here at Westminster Labour were in power. Essentially the two Governments were being run by the same party, with the addition of the Lib Dems. What is your insight on how that came about when you had two parties essentially running both Governments?

Alex Salmond: The argument for it and the claim, which has probably been made to this Committee, was that it was not necessary, because everybody knew each other—they could lift a phone, they were all chums and all the rest of it; I think that is how the Chair described it. However, I know that that is not true—not that they were not all chums, but I know that it wasn't working. I am sure that if you called Henry McLeish before this Committee, he would detail the difficulties he had on a range of things with Whitehall resistance, some of which could have been brought through the JMC structure.

I started to list a number of things. There were some public disputes, but there were also disputes that I had never heard of, such as the security money for Gleneagles, which wasn't a bagatelle; we are talking about a substantial number in the tens of millions of pounds. That is money that any fishing community would have been grateful for, be it for regeneration purposes or whatever. This was a big thing that was unstated; I had never heard it stated before that there was this bill hanging in the ether that the



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Scottish Government were expected to pay. I can assure you that we didn't pay it, incidentally, and eventually it disappeared.

There were things that would have been capable of resolution that weren't resolved. In the middle of whatever chumminess was going on, there were icebergs that weren't being confronted. The impression that I was given, and what John Elvidge certainly believed, is that although day-to-day co-operation between civil servants was taking place effectively and all the rest of it, some of these disputes were starting to crowd over into other things; they were beginning to niggle at the heart of governance.

Q284 David Duguid: I want to come back to that concept. I will also come back to what you described as the second phase being much more productive between 2010 and 2014, particularly in the run-up to the independence referendum. You then mentioned the third phase, which was effectively post-2014. You described that as a total breakdown—apologies if I have misquoted you here—caused by Brexit and the attitudes around Brexit. Could you maybe give us a bit more detail on how those attitudes presented themselves on both sides during that period?

Alex Salmond: Again, you remember, I am out of Government; I am just an observer of the political scene, and I have no more insight than that. That is why I rely on Bernard Jenkin's Committee's understanding of Brexit. Basically, what that Committee said was that there were ramifications of Brexit that the UK Government didn't bother to tell the devolved Administrations about. I suppose the principal piece of legislation would be the single market proposals, which clearly impinged on devolution across a range of areas. I could understand the Scottish and Welsh Governments being extremely aggrieved by that process. I think the Northern Irish Government had been in abeyance at the time.

It seems that what the Committee said is correct. There may be reasons for that, in the sense that there were great pressures at Westminster with narrow majorities and all the rest of it. There was a huge dispute about the Brexit issue. But when you are impinging on another Parliament's responsibilities, you have got kind of an obligation to make sure they know at least what you are doing. Of course, it may be that they did not really know what they were doing—

Q285 David Duguid: This question draws on your not insignificant experience as a parliamentarian, although at this point you were on the outside looking in and observing, during a period that, admittedly, was difficult. I have the scars of being on the side of a Government with a very small majority; I remember that time well. But during that time, significant amounts of funding—I think it was about £180 million—were given to the Scottish Government to help with preparation for what was inevitably going to come when we eventually did come out of the EU. Do you agree with a number of SNP Cabinet Secretaries, your former colleagues, that because the SNP and, they would argue, the people of Scotland didn't vote for Brexit, they should not lift a finger to prepare for Brexit?



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Alex Salmond: I don't think it is debatable what the people of Scotland voted for; that was recorded in the referendum. I saw this argument pursued by Michael Russell many times; I think he was the Brexit Cabinet Minister in Scotland. He put forward a pretty reasonable case. He was saying, "Look, we are making these preparations, but we don't know what is going to happen." That is what Jenkin's Committee pointed to: where are we going to be left? But, if we take away the communications, take away the confusion, take away the point of crisis, underlying this is the fact that the Brexit process has resulted, has it not, in a substantial encroachment on many of the previous competences of the Scottish Parliament, particularly through the single market legislation. Given that one of the arguments of the Brexiteers—I am trying to remember which side you were on—

David Duguid: I was not involved. I was not even an MP then.

Alex Salmond: Oh, you had no opinion! One the arguments of some of your predecessor Conservatives was that Brexit would result in more competences and that automatically all these regional aid things would flow to the Scottish Parliament. That was one of the arguments.

Q286 **David Duguid:** It was not automatic; it required statutory instruments, which, as a Minister in the Scotland Office, I had great pleasure in signing off to the Scottish Parliament.

Alex Salmond: But the single market legislation, as you will understand from your ministerial experience, impinged on many of the Scottish Parliament's responsibilities.

Q287 **David Duguid:** Are you talking about the United Kingdom Internal Market Act?

Alex Salmond: Yeah, the United Kingdom Internal Market Act. There is no question about that. If we go right back to 2008 or 2009 and the Calman Commission, there were lots of legislative instruments under the procedure—LCMs, legislative consent motions—that I put through the Scots Parliament. One of the things I said was, "Well, why are you doing all these? Why are you letting Westminster?" Because they will have additional powers coming to the Parliament and as long as the Parliament said, "We want the additional powers," there was no harm in having them, I did not think, legislated at Westminster. Why not? But when the reverse is the case and there are implications through the British market legislation effectively taking discretion away, then you can understand that that will lead to substantial upset.

Q288 **David Duguid:** My question was specifically about the preparation for Brexit rather than the United Kingdom Internal Market Act, but I appreciate that you were not actually there at the time; I was just seeking your opinion. In the interests of time, I will move on to my next question, which related to this period between 2010 and 2014 and the Edinburgh Agreement. You mentioned earlier that that was actually a good period for intergovernmental relations in your opinion because neither side of that debate was interested in being made to look like the



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bad guy. That is because there was going to be a vote on essentially which scenario the people of Scotland preferred—the status quo within the United Kingdom, so the United Kingdom Government did not have any interest in showing themselves in a bad light, or separation from the rest of the United Kingdom and having an independent Scotland, and so yourself as First Minister leading that campaign did not have an interest in showing too much belligerence when it was not necessarily required. I do not know if it was tongue-in-cheek when you said that perhaps the fact that we are not having repeat referendums on independence has led to us losing that intergovernmental relation. Was that a tongue-in-cheek comment?

Alex Salmond: No—I was talking about the situation in the absence of a set process. It seems to me that in the absence of saying, “Well, how do you get to a place where the people of Scotland make a decision on independence?”—I saw a contribution from you on this subject not that long ago with regard to the self-determination Bill—how do you get that process? Once you have established the process, everybody plays to that process. Without that process—without knowing there is a point of decision, whether it be an election or a referendum—lots of issues become proxies.

Q289 **David Duguid:** That process, which I think you described as a gold standard—

Alex Salmond: No, no. That wasn’t me.

David Duguid: Was that someone else?

Alex Salmond: That was somebody else.

David Duguid: But it was described as a gold standard agreement: the Edinburgh Agreement that had been agreed—

Alex Salmond: No, sorry—not the Edinburgh Agreement. The gold standard process was accorded to section 30. I didn’t like that description, because the question is, “How does Scotland express its sovereignty?” You shouldn’t elevate one particular arrangement over other ways that could equally be applied. I mean, the Chair has supported every single one of them.

Q290 **David Duguid:** Whoever said gold standard, the description was in reference to the Edinburgh Agreement. You have already said that the relationship between you and David Cameron, who was Prime Minister at the time, led to an agreement, which both Parliaments agreed to—or had a majority agree to activate section 30, and to temporarily award or give the Scottish Parliament powers to hold a referendum. That is what happened, so I would argue that that is the process.

Alex Salmond: I don’t disagree with much that you have said thus far in this question. Your question is: was I being tongue-in-cheek? No, I wasn’t being entirely tongue-in-cheek. I wasn’t arguing for successive referendums necessarily. I am just saying that whatever process is established, once it is established, the reason for a lot of the arm wrestling



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between Governments disappears. That was our experience. That is why, counterintuitively to what most people might have thought, that was the case in that period between 2010 and 2014.

Can I just point out to you that the process of ministerial proper governance was re-established in 2007 under Gordon Brown as Prime Minister and myself as First Minister? Now, I don't disagree that it was taken forward somewhat in the years 2010 to 2014, but it was first re-established in 2007.

Q291 David Duguid: The question I wanted to ask was: if what I understand you are advocating is to have an agreed process by which the people of Scotland could regularly come back and have the question put to them, how is that different from just running the referendum time and again until you get the result you want?

Alex Salmond: Because it is not necessarily a section 30 referendum. If you are looking for an example in statute, the Good Friday Agreement would give you an example: the mechanism is provided for every seven years. If it seems, in the opinion of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, that there is an appetite or wish for a unification poll, it can occur not less than seven years after the previous one. That is in statute and legislation. It is by no means the only reason for peace in Northern Ireland, but I am merely saying that providing a constitutional route for people's aspirations in Northern Ireland has been a help in the peace process. There is no question about that, in my opinion.

Scotland is not Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland is not Scotland, but the fact that there is an example elsewhere in these islands of doing exactly that would seem to me to be a strong argument in favour of having something—whatever it may be. Is it, as your colleague—your former Conservative leader—used to say: that what you required was an absolute majority in the Scottish Parliament, and then, of course, there would have to be a referendum? That was the generally held view. Perhaps it is—as your very former colleague, the late Margaret Thatcher, used to say—about a majority of Members of Parliament from Scotland believing in independence. Whatever it may be and whatever mechanism is agreed, once that mechanism is agreed, other things stop being used as proxy arguments for independence.

Q292 David Duguid: I am conscious that Christine wants to get in with that last question. I have two more questions that I want to ask, but I will limit myself to one. I am wondering how you feel about the opportunity for the two Governments to work together.

Given that we are no longer in the EU, that previously EU structural funds were available for projects around the whole UK, including Scotland obviously, and that now we have various UK Treasury-funded, UK-wide funds, such as levelling up and shared prosperity, how do you feel about those funds being used in areas such as transport? Transport is mostly—almost entirely—a devolved responsibility, but, as we have seen with the Network North project contributing to the A75 in Dumfries and Galloway,



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how do you see that as an opportunity for the two Governments to work constructively together—in a similar way to the city region deals, for example—to push forward strategic transport projects, not just where they connect with England but further across Scotland?

Alex Salmond: I once suggested that the fast rail should have started from the north to go south. I am pretty certain that a lot of people probably agree now. We would certainly have got more of it built if that had happened. Yes, there should be co-operation in transport. There was in many areas—the JMC discussed airport policy.

I would put two things to you. I suspect that if you were to analyse the structural funding—the levelling-up funding—and the Scottish percentage, comparing it to the European structural funds, you will find that Scotland did rather better out of the European structural funds in percentage share. I am sure that research would back that up.

On co-operation spending and what funds there are for integrated transport systems, I think you and I both think that that would be a very good idea. It is not always as integrated as we would like it to be.

Q293 **David Duguid:** My very last question, I promise. On that, we are both very familiar with the transport infrastructure in the north-east of Scotland. The A90 in particular has done really well in recent years with the bypass around Aberdeen. I think it was when you were campaigning for the 2007 Holyrood elections, you promised that in your first 100 days you would put legislation in place to dual the A90 north of Ellon. What happened there?

Alex Salmond: I would have to look at the particular quote. Dualling the A90 north of Ellon? Right. Bringing about the Aberdeen bypass I regard as a fairly substantial achievement, given that in the 50 years previously it had not been brought about. The difficulty we had with extending it, which is what I wanted to do, was that there was a gentleman who worked for Robert Gordon University—you may remember—who kept making court challenges. Every time we changed the route or expanded it, he could delay us for another two years. That was a very frustrating experience. It affected things like the bridge just north of Inverurie to Huntly—

David Duguid: Inveramsay.

Alex Salmond: Yes. Eventually, I had to do that as a separate project. It also affected things like the overlay south of Aberdeen. The reason that we could not integrate them into the bypass project was that we would have been subject to yet another delay. Eventually, I had to decide to get on with it, to get it done and to get it built. You, like me as a Member of Parliament, it would be ambitious to say—

Q294 **David Duguid:** How does that tally with successive Cabinet Secretaries and Transport Ministers in the Scottish Parliament in recent years refusing to consider it?



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Alex Salmond: I think they should certainly consider it, because the “corner” deserves greater infrastructure, but you and I both benefit from the bypass, as we are well aware.

Chair: I am conscious of time. Michael Shanks wants to come in with a very quick supplementary.

Q295 **Michael Shanks:** I have a quick supplementary on the issue of the civil service, which you mentioned earlier. I am conscious that civil servants do not have the same opportunity to speak, so maybe we should focus on the political leadership. You talked about Sir Peter Housden and Sir John Elvidge providing very good civil service leadership in Scotland, and you have outlined more recent challenges in the management of the civil service. Do you have any reflections on how that could be handled better and, looking towards the future, what could be done differently?

Alex Salmond: First, let us reflect on permanent secretaries. Gus O’Donnell was Cabinet Secretary in 2010. It was to be my choice of the permanent secretary—for the first time for the First Minister. Gus O’Donnell recommended Peter Housden, and I remember what he said to me. First: “He’s the best I’ve got”—meaning of his permanent secretaries. I hope that is not offending anyone who was around at the time, but that is what he told me. Secondly, he said, “He’s 60 years old and moving to Scotland will be his last major job. Therefore when he’s permanent secretary, if you employ him as permanent secretary, that is what he’ll want to climax his career doing. He won’t be looking for his next job perhaps back in Whitehall.” He said something like, “I don’t know if Peter’s ever been to Scotland, but after a week in the job, he’ll go native.” He meant that in a good sense—that he would see his role and absolute preoccupation as running the Scottish Government efficiently, properly and with a parity of esteem.

He was a superb civil servant, as was his predecessor, Sir John Elvidge. They were superb because they had a total preoccupation with ensuring that the Scottish civil service could demonstrate that it was best in class when compared with Departments at Whitehall. They also insisted on parity of esteem in negotiations with the Government. People go, “Why is that important?” I’ll tell you why it is important: it gives every single civil servant a feeling that they are part of something really important, if they led in that direction. It is not the only thing that is necessary, but it is a big thing.

Q296 **Michael Shanks:** Just to bring us up to date, though, there were two good civil servants and good leadership around there in your assessment. What broke down since then? You have had very public issues with the civil service in Scotland. Focusing on the political leadership of those civil servants, what has happened since?

Alex Salmond: Let us not go into too many areas surrounding the lack of leadership. For various reasons, I obviously used to look at the Twitter feed of Ms Leslie Evans, and she used to describe her “Whitehall Wednesdays”—as she called them—as the highlight of her week. First,



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Peter Housden and Sir John Elvidge would very seldom be at Whitehall as they were busy running their Departments. I thought that was the most curious thing for a Scottish permanent secretary to say. The highlight of her week should be some great achievement in Scotland. However, that is a comment.

On John-Paul Marks, I do not know. I have corresponded with him but I have not had the opportunity to meet him. He has great credentials in terms of his career in the civil service, but I would have one question. I think he is about 44. He may want to finish off his career in Scotland, but it is perhaps more likely he will want to go back to the Treasury, where he originally came from. When you are appointing the leader of the Scottish civil service, by all means appoint someone who has had experience in Whitehall Departments, but ensure that their absolute preoccupation and ultimate job is leading the Scottish civil service. That should be the highlight of their careers.

Chair: Thanks, Alex. I think we need to move on—I am very conscious of time.

Q297 **Christine Jardine:** I will be brief. Thank you very much for your evidence today, Mr Salmond. You and I could argue for the next year about which policies have been right for Scotland and which policies have been wrong for Scotland.

Alex Salmond: We did!

Christine Jardine: And we have done in the past. One of the things you have mentioned today is the Scotland Office and how you feel that it is a waste of money. I could make the counter argument that there are lots of appointments in the Scottish Government that are a waste of money and do not actually help the Scottish people. I think what we, and everyone in this room, have in common is that we want our Governments to work for the benefit of the people of Scotland going forward.

If we take that perspective and look at what the future might hold—I know you will say independence, but we will put that to one side, and I will not say federalism—how do we continue to make devolution work? We have had three iterations of the Scotland Act now. How do we continue to make it work? We have talked about improvements in the civil service and the committee structure, but when it comes right down to it, it is about the people in the room making the decision. How do we impress upon them and encourage them to work in a structure, and what that structure looks like, to work for the best outcomes for Scotland and its people?

Alex Salmond: Let us make the assumption that that is what these people—the civil servants and the Ministers—want to do.

Christine Jardine: I am sure that they do.

Alex Salmond: We will start with the assumption that people are setting out with the best of intentions. Therefore, you have to have a structure that allows those intentions to be best expressed and does not get them



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embroiled in daft side-issue arguments. My opinion on the Scotland Office is not just based on the money. It embroils people in side-issue arguments and turf wars that are destructive of sensible policy making. You find a means of structure. Now this new 2022 structure that you have been considering, apart from it being very complex—

Q298 **Christine Jardine:** Do you like it?

Alex Salmond: I do like the idea of the dispute resolution procedure. I can see the secretariat has certain advantages, but I have a natural suspicion every time the civil service comes up with an idea for another secretariat. You should ask who is paying for it, how big it is going to be, when is it going to start, will it become a new Department—all sorts of stuff like that. I am sure you will inquire into all that, but let's just make sure that the structure allows these best of intentions to be carried forward.

I do think it would help, in the ultimate dispute resolution, if there was an agreed procedure for progress for the Scottish people. For those who aspire to independence, there should be a procedure to get there. When we had the procedure to get there, it seemed to help in other areas as well. I am not saying that we will all go off hand in hand to Neverland together but, none the less, it would be good for effective and competent government, which is in our joint interests.

Q299 **Chair:** Thank you for that. This has been a fascinating session, as we knew it would be. I have one last question. It does look like there is going to be a new Government coming. With your experience from your seven years as First Minister, what would your advice be to them about resolving, fixing, trying to come to terms with intergovernmental relations? What would you propose and suggest that they think about as a priority?

Alex Salmond: Don't rely on old chums. Don't rely on the informal network. The great wisdom that your enemies sometimes sit alongside you, as opposed to opposite you, should imply that the idea that you can compensate for ineffective process as a Government, when you are hoping that somebody gets on with somebody else, is ludicrous. For goodness' sake, do not fall back into that trap. Try to get something that is streamlined, effective and has that recognition of the worth and value of the person on the other side of the table, or around the table. That would be my general advice.

My advice to the Scottish negotiators is, make as many alliances as you can with Wales and Northern Ireland through these structures, because obviously it helps if there are three voices saying one thing. My advice to a Labour Government is to try not to believe that encroaching on the territory of the devolved Parliaments is a sensible way to enhance the prestige at Westminster. It might well be that the prestige at Westminster would be enhanced if it did the opposite.

I did note, since we referred to Gordon Brown, that those of his proposals that seemed to enhance the prestige of the devolved Parliaments, such as



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the Lords becoming the Assembly of Nations, seem to be getting back-pedalled, and the ones that might have diminished it, such as elected mayors, which should be a Scottish and Welsh competence, seem to be shoved to the forward. So, don't fall into the trap of believing that Westminster would be greater if you make Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland smaller. The reverse is true.

The sensible policy in Westminster would be not to try to re-encroach on territory that has been previously conceded, but to find a way to administer the islands as best you can. As I say, find a procedure to allow the people of Scotland their right to express their sovereign right of self-determination.

Chair: On that note, thank you. We have covered a great deal of ground and territory today. There were a couple of things you said you might get back to the Committee about. We look forward to that and any other thoughts you have in the course of this inquiry. We will be more than happy to receive them. Thank you for your attendance today.