



International Relations and Defence

Corrected oral evidence: The UK's future relationship with the US

Wednesday 17 September 2025

3.50 pm

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Members present: Lord De Mauley (The Chair); Lord Bruce of Bennachie; Baroness Coussins; Baroness Crawley; Lord Darroch of Kew; Lord Grocott; Lord Houghton of Richmond; Baroness Morris of Bolton; Lord Soames of Fletching.

Evidence Session No. 14

Heard in Public

Questions 155 - 160

Witness

[I](#): Dr Nell Breyer, Executive Director, Association of Marshall Scholars.

Examination of witness

Dr Nell Breyer.

Q155 **The Chair:** Good afternoon, Dr Breyer. Thank you so much for sparing the time to join us. We are of course aware that the association has recently published a poll about the US-UK relationship. I want to kick off by asking if you could tell us how Americans perceive the importance of the relationship between the US and the UK when compared with relationships that the US has with other countries. Does the polling data support the notion of a genuine special relationship, or is that concept evolving?

Dr Nell Breyer: Thank you very much for having me, Mr Chairman. I am the executive director of the Association of Marshall Scholars, which, as you know, is an alumni association and works actively with the larger networks of those alumni to bring inter-parliamentary exchanges, legal exchanges, forums, grants and scholarships to our two countries.

We have seen robust data over the last five to seven years showing that 40% of the general population still believe that the UK is the No. 1 ally for the United States. That has been consistent. It is slightly different when you look under the hood at the segmented data. I would argue that the party shifting is less important and less reliable than the generational divide in the perceptions. I think you have the data, but to underscore, 45% to 50% of people over 50 agree that the UK is the No. 1 ally and strategic partner, while about 28% to 30% of those under 50 see things that way. That divide becomes even more stark for the under-30s, who see the UK, Canada and China respectively as potential strategic partners and allies. Does that answer your question? Do you want me to go into a bit more detail?

The Chair: Maybe we will get into a bit more detail with further questions. That is very helpful as a starter. Thank you so much.

Q156 **Baroness Coussins:** I was going to ask about variations between the generations. Did the survey uncover any regional or other broader demographic variations in how the so-called special relationship is understood or valued? What do those differences suggest for how the long-term future of the relationship can withstand that pressure?

Dr Nell Breyer: The generational divide is the starkest, and that is something that we saw even with Covid. We see it as a consistent rising trend that young people see China as a significant presence, and that is much less the case for older generations. I would argue that this year we had an outlier with the party divide. The Democrats and the Republicans have over the five years that we have been running the survey said consistently that the UK is the No. 1 partner. This year, Democrats slightly migrated to defend Canada. You see that shift in the demographics, but, looking back, it has not been the case. What it means is that this year there is stronger Republican than Democratic support for the alliance. It is not surprising.

We do two things to try to understand what people think is a strategic partner and what they think constitutes an alliance. Before we ask, "Who is the most important ally?", we ask, "What are the main reasons why a country would be considered a valuable ally or strategic partner?" We gave them a few options, including shared trade and business; military defence and intelligence-sharing; democratic values and common principles of government; cultural, linguistic and shared history; or none of those. Consistently, a plurality of respondents—35% of them—said democratic norms and values. That underscores quite a lot. We have a second question that drills even deeper into that and asks, "Between the US and the UK, what is it that holds us together? What has helped the alliance the most?" Again, 35% to 40% of the respondents say that it is democratic norms and values. That is over political leadership and Government and over business and trade. Those were between 27% and 34% over time, and between 15% and 18% over the year-on-year data. It is not surprising. If—

The Chair: I do not know whether you can still hear us, Dr Breyer, but you have frozen from our perspective. We shall have a break while we sort out the communications.

Sitting suspended.

The Chair: Welcome back.

Dr Nell Breyer: I am sorry about that. The alliance might be strong, but my internet not so much.

I was pointing out that in our questions we try to get at what makes the alliance. It is not just Government to Government, it is not just a shared history, and it is not just business and trade. It is overall the values that we share.

Q157 **Lord Grocott:** Thanks very much for the information that you have given us so far. I know that you have been looking at this kind of material over quite a period. This is almost like a journalist's question, although I am not a journalist. What is the headline from your most recent survey? Is there anything that shocked you or surprised you or that you were not ready for? Can you generalise at all about real and permanent trends in the relationship between the UK and the US as revealed in your surveys?

Dr Nell Breyer: We have seen consistent belief that the UK is the No. 1 partner. I do not know about shocking, but the distinct second headline is that young people perhaps see that less clearly. That statistically significant difference in view, between what a 50, 60, or 70 year-old might say and a 30 year-old might say, has held true through Covid and a visible tariff war currently. Even as the numbers of those younger people drop, they come back to China as a perceived strong presence. I suggest, just off the top of my head, not having run any data on this, that you look at the numbers available on Google on our presence—what young people see; there are 300,000 Chinese students in our universities as compared to 10,000 British students and 13% of our total US imports,

at least last year, of \$438 billion compared to 1.6% of our imports coming from the UK. At least according to Pew, 33% of US adults and 63% of US teens are on TikTok—over 100 million—as opposed to 60 million US users of the BBC. There is a large presence of China, which I do not think is necessarily negative at all, and that actively influences how young people perceive China as a presence.

We have a baseline control study where we asked Marshall scholars the same thing that we asked the general public, and we had an overwhelmingly higher response that the UK is the No. 1 ally. You see a difference that is consistent and emerging. A side note on that is where people get their news. You may have already heard quite a lot about that in your previous hearings, but it holds true in our data as well. While 50% of the general population, if you tally it all up, say they know about the UK from the news media, 25% say social media. In fact, that is flipped for young people. Only 26% of people under 30 say their knowledge about the UK comes from news media, whereas 45% say their knowledge about the UK comes from social media. That is something to keep in mind.

I deal a lot with young people, and I see the importance of having first hand exposure, knowing people and institutions and understanding the country from the inside. We have seen a lot of stickiness of goodwill in the Marshall community with a resounding impact for the alliance and for the UK. I believe it will be important for this committee to keep in mind the next generations coming up who have not lived through world wars.

Q158 Baroness Morris of Bolton: Good morning, Dr Breyer. Are there specific areas of policy where respondents see the US-UK relationship as particularly strong or beneficial, such as trade, defence or security? Do they pick out something in particular, or is it just general?

Dr Nell Breyer: We asked that in terms of US business opportunities that the respondents might see as offered by UK industry. The two predominant areas were technology and artificial intelligence, and the creative industries, unsurprisingly—film, media, fashion, music, sports and culture. We asked a secondary policy question regarding the state visit in terms of the general public's interest in what priorities there were for any agreements to emerge. We have seen a lot. Trade and economic co-operation were the first priority—38%, a plurality—and defence and national security were the secondary priorities in our polling.

Q159 Lord Bruce of Bennachie: It is interesting that you mentioned the China relationship. You said that you did not think it was negative, yet President Trump started off by taking a very hostile view towards China. He has now backpedalled. To what extent is the relationship with China going to play out if the perception in the United States is more positive than the perception in the White House?

You mentioned young people having a less positive attitude [towards the UK] than older generations. Should we be doing more to promote our creative industries—I read that Coldplay are about to out-earn Taylor

Swift, and Oasis has been a hit in Chicago and elsewhere—and indeed sport and other creative sectors? Are there things that we should do, or what do you think that we could or should do to try to reach people who appear to be less favourably impressed towards the UK? To what extent do you think that the relationships of both the UK and the US with China, which are clearly in a state of flux, will play out in ways that might either bring us together or drive us apart? Is there any other aspect that you think we should focus on?

Dr Nell Breyer: I deal daily with a set of Americans who have had the extraordinary opportunity to study in the UK, and that has a lifelong impact on those individuals. The first recommendation is to continue your extraordinary university culture opportunities and the international programmes that you support, which really make a lifelong difference. I will share some examples so that you have that top of mind.

I do not know whether the committee is aware, but in just the last three or four years Marshall scholar alumni helped create AUKUS from the US side. The scientists who created the AlphaFold AI protein-folding model and were awarded the Nobel Prize were, again, Marshall scholars, collaborating, living and working in the UK currently. The Dolby centre that opened this year at the Cavendish labs at the University of Cambridge, a renowned physics centre in your country, was established through a £150 million gift from a Marshall scholar because he studied there. That returns your investment in that small scheme fully, plus another £30 million. There are huge numbers of examples within this small community of individuals who retain that impression, value and connection to the UK. It is personal. It is a deep understanding. Those programmes have a huge impact.

Secondarily, it will be hard to compete with TikTok and the production scale of China, and I would not recommend it. I do not think that is the way, especially as it is not what we see as the predominant glue. It is not necessarily the strength of the UK. There is certainly a lot in the cultural hooks, things like Harry Potter and the Royal Family, and football, which you have talked a lot about in this committee, for good reason. There is a lot, but there is a much deeper connection, and it is important for younger generations to understand the kind of fundamental cohesion or overlap that our two countries share.

Lord Bruce of Bennachie: I have a very small supplementary. What you have just said suggests to me that younger people are less positive because they have been less exposed. The possibility is that, if they are more exposed, by the time they become older people, they will have a more positive attitude, so we should do more to encourage young people to engage with us.

Dr Nell Breyer: That is absolutely clear in our side-by-side data. We have only 2,200 scholars who answer that questionnaire compared with our general public. The significant, overwhelming Anglophile-ness of the responses suggests that, when they visit, stay and study, they develop

tentacles into your country that return in dividends. It is hard to measure.

Q160 Lord Darroch of Kew: I have a quick supplementary. First of all, Nell, it is lovely to see you again. I remember well working with you while I was there. Thank you for all you have done for the Marshall scholars over the years.

I have two quick questions to follow on from the questions that you have just heard. Since we will no doubt touch in our report on the value of the Marshall scholarship programme, if you had one wish on the programme for the future, what would it be? Would it be simply more scholarships, or are there other things about it that you would like to see changed? You have put a huge amount of work into it over the years.

The second is a more existential question. I was very struck by the gulf between the way people over 50 in America think of us and the way people below 50 think about us, and what that tells us potentially about our impact as the UK in 20 or 30 years' time, if that is the trend for the future. Do you think what you described about the rise of China is just because of TikTok and China's rising economic and global importance and all that kind of thing, or are there reasons why we are declining and might be seen as less relevant and less important to America that are about Britain's reputation, how we have looked since Brexit and things like that, which make people think we do not quite count as much as we used to?

Dr Nell Breyer: Can I answer in reverse order? Other than my speculation about the large number of Chinese students who are their friends and colleagues and who are all over the US, and the large number of goods and the large amount of information, I do not have a statistical or data-based answer on negative perceptions of the UK. That would surprise me. We have politically followed almost in lockstep with every kind of political turmoil that you have had, with different specifics but very similar political appetite and trends. I think it is just exposure; I really think it is as simple as that. It is exposure. China is enormous and has enormous numbers of people, scale and impact, and you cannot deny that. That is not the way to compete at scale. I do not think it is a negative view of Britain. It is simply exposure. Other people have testified to you about the west coast versus the east coast.

On the wish list for the scholarship, from my standpoint, it is securing it. It is sustaining it and creating a trust, an endowment or a structure that means that this programme, which has been unbelievably successful, punching above its weight and returning so much to both the UK and the alliance, could last. That is the most important consideration. How to do that is up to the British Government. I know that alumni and others who have invested in the programme to complement British money have already started seeding little endowments with the hope that the Government will take seriously how the programme will be sustained. Right now, we see the Fulbright on pause in the United States with a similar statutory requirement to run the programme. It does not matter if

the folks in charge do not want to fund something. They do not have to fund something even if a loss occurs. If the Government look at this programme and see it as beneficial to the UK and what they want to get out of it—it is very important now and it has had a lifetime—how does this thing go on past the Marshall plan, past the memory of the Marshall plan and how can they infuse it with the kind of energy and purpose for young people that it has had successfully for the last 70 or 75 years?

Lord Darroch of Kew: Thank you for that last point. I am glad that you had the opportunity to make it.

The Chair: Thank you so much for what you do and for presenting your poll results to us this afternoon. It has been extremely interesting. Many thanks.