

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, HC 385

[Monday 3 November 2025](#)

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Aphra Brandreth; Phil Brickell; Dan Carden; Richard Foord; Uma Kumaran; Abtisam Mohamed; Edward Morello; Sir John Whittingdale.

Questions 249-349

Witnesses

[I](#): Sir Chris Wormald KCB - Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service at Cabinet Office, and Sir Oliver Robbins KCMG CB - Permanent Under-Secretary at Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Chris Womald and Sir Oliver Robbins.

Chair: Today the Committee is taking evidence again on the appointment of former UK ambassador to the US Lord Mandelson. Could our witnesses introduce themselves for the record?

Sir Chris Womald: I am Sir Chris Womald, Cabinet Secretary.

Sir Oliver Robbins: Olly Robbins, Permanent Under-Secretary at the FCDO.

Q249 **Chair:** Thank you both very much for coming. To be fair to people just tuning in, let us put this in context. Sir Olly, when it came to the appointment of Lord Mandelson, you commissioned the vetting and were Lord Mandelson's line manager; and Sir Chris, you were responsible for the due diligence. The Prime Minister appointed Lord Mandelson. I think everyone has agreed that the system for direct ministerial appointments is inadequate, and it has been changed.

I would like to take this in a logical order, so we will start with questions on the vetting process and then go to due diligence, so I will come back and ask some questions about open source and due diligence, if that is all right. Then, at the end, I think we have a suggestion as to how the process could be improved. Fleur will start the questions.

Sir Chris Womald: Sorry, just for absolute clarity, I was appointed Cabinet Secretary on 16 December and Lord Mandelson was appointed on 18 December, so the processes we are going to describe mainly happened under my predecessor, Simon Case—I was there right at the end—but I will answer across the entire period.

While I have the floor, I also want to say—I am sure everyone takes the same view—that on anything relating to this issue and Mr Epstein, our first thoughts are for the victims. I know the Committee would share that view.

Chair: Certainly. When arranging these hearings, we asked for someone who could come and answer our questions and we made clear the sort of questions that we wanted to ask, and you were chosen as the appropriate person to answer.

Sir Chris Womald: Yes.

Chair: We actually suggested Darren Tierney, who is the former head of propriety and ethics who ran the process, but I think it was thought that it was better that you came.

Sir Chris Womald: Yes.

Q250 **Fleur Anderson:** We agree with you as a Committee that our thoughts are with the Epstein victims in all of this, as the background.



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Sir Olly, could you set out the normal process that the FCDO uses to appoint an ambassador?

Sir Oliver Robbins: Of course. What we would normally do is advertise the job across the diplomatic service. It would be often, although not invariably, open to the wider civil service for appropriately qualified candidates. There would then be a pretty standard-looking civil service panel interview. For our most senior jobs, we often involve external people in that interview process. Then, through internal governance, ultimately I take responsibility for a recommendation to the Foreign Secretary on the most appropriately qualified person, or occasionally people, for the job. She, of course, then makes that recommendation herself to the King, and she is perfectly entitled to query my recommendation and ask questions about it.

Q251 **Fleur Anderson:** When in that process does the security vetting take place, normally?

Sir Oliver Robbins: In that standard process I have described to you, we are normally dealing with people who already enjoy the required level of security clearance. UK-based staff in the Foreign Office, from whom the vast majority of our ambassadors and high commissioners are drawn, will already hold developed vetting clearance.

Q252 **Fleur Anderson:** For Lord Mandelson's appointment, was it the same situation—he already had the security clearance and so did not need to be vetted? Was there any difference from the normal process for his appointment?

Sir Oliver Robbins: It was different, because this was not run as a standard civil service/diplomatic service process. As the Committee will probably be aware, there is a specific exemption in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 for heads of mission appointments from time to time to be appointed directly by Ministers. They are known as political appointments, although they do not actually have to be politicians or even politically motivated; it is just the choice of politicians. Lord Mandelson's appointment, as one or two others over the years have done, fell into that category.

To answer the other part of your question, he did not hold national security vetting when he was appointed, but, as is normally the case with external appointments to my Department and the wider civil service, the appointment was made subject to obtaining security clearance.

Q253 **Chair:** You said there were other examples. Do you mind giving some other examples of political appointments to ambassadorial roles?

Sir Oliver Robbins: The only two from recent history are Ed Llewellyn—Lord Llewellyn—who was originally appointed to Paris and then subsequently to Rome when David Cameron was Prime Minister, and Sir George Hollingbery, who was appointed as ambassador in Havana when Theresa May was Prime Minister, I think. Actually, I will have to double check who was Prime Minister at the time, but it was under the last party in power.

Going back further—I think you alluded to this in the House of Commons recently, Chair—we have had Lord Boateng in Pretoria, Baroness Liddell in Canberra—

Chair: Valerie Amos.

Sir Oliver Robbins: Indeed—Baroness Amos. There is no set pattern, as you know, but we seem to be in a rhythm where there are one or two per Parliament. Obviously, there is no specific provision for the number or volume in the legislation. They are not terribly frequent, but they are not unheard of.

Q254 **Aphra Brandreth:** In the two recent examples that you gave, was the vetting clearance process completed before or after the appointments were announced?

Sir Oliver Robbins: The issue did not, I think, arise in the case of Lord Llewellyn, in that he enjoyed developed vetting status as chief of staff in No. 10 as a temporary civil servant. I would have to double check with Sir George Hollingbery. My educated guess is that it would have been a very similar process to the one we followed with Lord Mandelson—that an appointment was made subject to the achievement of vetting clearance.

Chair: Can you write to us about that?

Sir Chris Wormald: Let me add, because it may be helpful, that when we are making appointments from outside the civil service, which obviously happens a lot more regularly than it does for ambassadors, the normal thing is for the security clearance to happen after appointment but before the person signs a contract and takes up post. If we are recruiting a permanent secretary or similar from outside the civil service, that is normally what would happen: the security clearance process would happen after the announcement of the appointment but before the person takes up post, and the appointment would be subject to the security clearance being granted.

While we are talking about differences, although the processes for ambassadors and for civil servants are very similar, they are different in one other regard. Just so I have said it, under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act, ambassador appointments are outside the ambit of the Civil Service Commission. That is the only other difference in the appointment process. Again, that is set out specifically in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act.

Q255 **Fleur Anderson:** The question that could be asked in the panel interviews, and that would be asked in vetting, is: “Is there anything that you know of in your background that would bring the Government into disrepute?” Would that be asked in the interview panel, or would it be saved for the vetting or the due diligence process?

Sir Oliver Robbins: In the panels we run for external applications to the diplomatic service, we normally do offer an opportunity to the candidate to explain any further issues they want to make the panel aware of, and it



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would normally also be something we would follow up if we wanted to make an offer to a candidate; we would offer another opportunity to disclose anything at that point as well. So yes.

Fleur Anderson: So that offer was there. In the letter to Simon Hoare—

Q256 **Chair:** Hang on. Was it asked? Were questions asked?

Sir Oliver Robbins: Sorry, Ms Anderson's question was specifically about what normal practice would be.

Q257 **Fleur Anderson:** In the interview for Lord Mandelson, was he given the opportunity? Was he asked, however it was worded: "Could you tell us anything that would bring the Government into disrepute?"

Sir Chris Wormald: This is where the process that Sir Oliver describes is different. There was no interview for Mr Mandelson; it was done as a direct appointment by Ministers, as Sir Oliver has described, and therefore there was no panel interview. That was the normal practice for direct ministerial appointments, whether they were ambassadorships or other direct ministerial appointments, for example to the home civil service or as direct advisers.

In the letter that I sent to PACAC and copied to this Committee, I explained that that area is one of the changes that we are making to the direct ministerial appointment process, so that we effectively replicate what would normally happen in a panel interview for direct ministerial appointments. There is a minuted conversation with the candidate, in which the same questions that you would normally ask in a panel interview about conflicts of interest or anything that the candidate wishes to raise that might bring the Government into disrepute, etc. are replicated in the direct ministerial appointment system. That is one of the changes that we have made to the process since Lord Mandelson was appointed.

Q258 **Fleur Anderson:** For this appointment specifically, Sir Olly, the Cabinet Secretary said that "a thorough process to understand and consider" Lord Mandelson's "private interests" was carried out as part of "the usual ambassadorial appointments process". There wasn't a panel interview so who carried out that assessment? Having done so, did they decide that any mitigations were required to prevent any conflicts of interest?

Sir Oliver Robbins: An external appointee to the senior reaches of the service will always be asked to fill in a conflict of interest form. I am very happy to share a copy of that standard form with the Committee if it would help. It is an opportunity for the candidate to set out the issues that they think might actually raise or potentially raise or be perceived as raising a conflict of interest. That process was completed in Lord Mandelson's case and his appointment was subject to him going through that process with us. The way in which we then discuss with him any of those perceived conflicts is obviously a confidential matter between him and us, but the process was followed rigorously.

Q259 **Fleur Anderson:** You say "us". Who was it that carried that out?



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Sir Oliver Robbins: That is for his employer, i.e. the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Q260 **Fleur Anderson:** Was it you? Who did it?

Sir Oliver Robbins: He submitted his form. That was assessed in the usual way and I did indeed have a conversation with him before he took up his appointment.

Q261 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Just quickly on the question of avoiding conflicts of interest, why was he not asked to relinquish his shareholding in Global Counsel?

Sir Oliver Robbins: This was honestly the hardest bit of this bit of the process for both of us. Lord Mandelson was a founder of the company. It is a private company, without traded stock. While he was confident that he could conduct his role as ambassador without giving rise to a conflict, we wanted to make sure we managed and mitigated that possibility in some particular ways. I did put in place some measures to do that with him, which we added to as time went on. As he tried to find ways out of the shareholding, which he was actively trying to do with Global Counsel, we were able to put in place an extra guarantee that he was not in fact going to be benefiting from any upside in those shares as his employment with us continued.

Q262 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Did the mitigations include ensuring that he was unaware of particular clients of Global Counsel or work being undertaken?

Sir Oliver Robbins: Yes.

Q263 **Sir John Whittingdale:** How did that work?

Sir Oliver Robbins: We managed this through his office in Washington and with advice from my HR department.

Q264 **Chair:** Can I ask one other question about conflicts of interest? You have talked about financial conflicts of interest. Is there room on the form for conflicts of interest in relation to friendships?

Sir Oliver Robbins: No. It is not a reputational conflict that is being targeted by that form; it is about reality or perceptions of economic and financial conflicts.

Chair: Okay.

Sir Oliver Robbins: And, sorry, conflicts of interest slightly more broadly than economic. For instance, if Lord Mandelson had been a trustee of a prominent environmental charity and had been working on pursuing Britain's environmental agenda in Washington, he would have declared that to us as well.

Q265 **Fleur Anderson:** I have a final question on that part of the process. Would it have been up to Lord Mandelson in that interview to declare anything, or would you have gone to that interview having done some work on what was in the public domain that you could question him about?

Sir Oliver Robbins: On conflicts of interest specifically?

Fleur Anderson: Yes.

Sir Oliver Robbins: That process depends on the candidate disclosing themselves things that they think are of potential or actual risk. Obviously, if he had not raised his shareholding in Global Counsel, I would have queried that, because I was well aware of it, but there is not a proactive duty on the employer to seek evidence and intelligence to put to the candidate. The process depends upon the candidate having a shared interest with the Department in managing and avoiding conflicts.

Q266 **Aphra Brandreth:** During the conversation that you had with him, were you aware that he had been sacked as Trade and Industry Secretary in 1998 for failing to declare an interest-free loan that he had received from someone whose businesses were being investigated by the Department at the time; that he had been sacked in 2001 after attempting to broker a British passport for a wealthy donor to the millennium dome project, with which he was involved; and that he had been criticised on numerous occasions as the European trade commissioner for accepting hospitality from companies on whose commercial interests he was in the process of ruling? Did any of those issues come up in the telephone conversation you had with him?

Sir Oliver Robbins: I knew Lord Mandelson's CV.

Aphra Brandreth: Those are not things you would usually put on your CV, I would imagine.

Sir Oliver Robbins: While I want to make sure with this Committee that we do not give Lord Mandelson any preferential treatment versus any other FCDO employee, I do also have a duty of care and confidentiality towards him, which means I do not want to treat him any worse than any other FCDO employee, so I think the substance of the conversation between him and me around his conflicts of interests needs to be between us. I was well aware of his background. I was well aware of the issues that you described from previously in his career. As I said in answer to Ms Anderson, the process depends upon Lord Mandelson and others in his position being open with us about the things that they fear could draw his employment into conflict of interest disrepute, and I am confident that we were thorough about that from a conflict of interest point of view.

Q267 **Edward Morello:** To link up the two points that have been made by Fleur and Aphra, you have a system based on self-declaration and you are dealing with somebody with a track record of not declaring. To Fleur's point, in that situation, faced with somebody with a track record of not being 100% transparent on their conflicts of interest, do you not have a responsibility as a Department to ensure that you are informed and you do the research to make sure that, if they have not declared something, you are aware of it beforehand?

Sir Oliver Robbins: I understand your question, and it is an important one. I think we do have a responsibility to treat candidates for these roles



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in a fair and balanced way across the people that we see. While I said in answer to Ms Brandreth's question that I did not try to hermetically seal off from the rest of my mind the knowledge that I and the Department had about Lord Mandelson's career and background, the system across the board on conflicts of interest is a self-declaration one, so we thought it proper to run the same system for Lord Mandelson as we would for any other potential employee.

Q268 **Chair:** The point is that he was not a candidate. You say, "We want to treat him fairly, as we would do any other candidate," but he was not a candidate; he was an appointee. That does make things different, doesn't it?

Sir Oliver Robbins: Excuse me: appointee. Even in my time in the Department, we have brought other people into senior roles from outside, and we have conducted the conflict of interest process at exactly the same point in the process.

Q269 **Chair:** The foundation of it seems to be that they have a form to fill in, you take it in good faith that they are filling that in correctly, and then you check what it is that they have said, so if they have omitted anything, no one is looking outside what is on the form.

Sir Oliver Robbins: That is broadly correct, yes. The only reason I say "broadly" is that there is also an assumption—and it is a declared assumption—that your entries into that form are full and true, and therefore we would be confirming the appointment and issuing a contract on the basis of a full declaration.

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes, and we ought to say that that is true of almost all the conflict of interest systems. I believe it is true for the conflict of interest system operating in Parliament that they are self-declared and then scrutinised, and it is certainly what we do in the wider civil service. We obviously have other processes, which we will come on to, which look at things in rather more detail.

Q270 **Edward Morello:** Just to clarify this point, you say that you have multiple people who have been brought in externally as appointments. Out of all these appointments, how many of them have a public track record of not declaring conflicts of interest? If that is a systemic problem, you have a problem in the system. If this is a one-off, it would suggest that in this situation it is worth having an alternative system.

Sir Chris Wormald: I do not know what Lord Mandelson would say about the accusation you have made about what he has done, but as I say, we have several systems that run here, and our security is maintained by the interaction of those systems. We have a due diligence exercise, which we will come on to—

Q271 **Chair:** I am so sorry to cut across you, but I want to remind the Committee that we are still on question 1. Sir Chris is trying to move us on, and I agree with him: we need to move on. There is the system of vetting that Sir Olly has talked about, which would be the normal way of

appointing or having candidates for ambassadorial purposes. Then there is a further system that is also done by Sir Chris. I think we need to make sure that we cover both.

Sir Chris Wormald: There are three processes.

Chair: Yes, I know. I am just trying to get on to process 2. If I can move on to process 2, then we will get on to process 3. *[Interruption.]* Uma, I am sorry, but I really want to get on to the next question.

Uma Kumaran: I have some follow-ups, though, to this.

Chair: Go on, then.

Q272 **Uma Kumaran:** We are talking about systems, but seemingly none of your systems 1, 2 or 3 has adequately flagged any of the issues. I have a copy here of the letter to the chair of PACAC, in which you said, "Due diligence largely collates publicly available information", and that "A summary of reputational risks, including his previous resignations as a minister, and his prior relationship with Jeffrey Epstein" had been flagged. As those responsible for doing the due diligence and the vetting, did you not flag to No. 10 or to others that this is a very serious issue, regardless—

Chair: Uma, we are getting on to that bit; I am just trying to do it systematically—I am so sorry. As I say, there are a number of processes. We have asked questions about difficulties in relation to process 1. Can Fleur move us on to process 2?

Q273 **Fleur Anderson:** Sir Chris, process 2 is the standard process for developed vetting, which I understand is the level of clearance that a senior ambassador, such as the ambassador to the USA, would have. Could you give us some information about that process?

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes. We are not actually doing these things in chronological order, by the way. The first thing we did was the due diligence, which we will do last. In this case, the developed vetting, in fact, came last.

I will say some general things about developed vetting. First, it is carried out on behalf of the employing institution, the FCDO. In this case, it would have been the FCDO that commissioned the developed vetting. We publish a variety of information about what developed vetting covers. We will not go beyond our published information, but basically the checks involved are a baseline personal security standard; a completion by the individual of a DV security questionnaire; a departmental and company records check, which will include staff files, staff reports, sick leave returns and security records; a check of both spent and unspent criminal records; a check of credit and financial history; a check of security service records; a full review of personal finances; a detailed interview conducted by a trained investigating officer; and further inquiries, including interviews with referees conducted by a trained investigating officer. Checks may extend to third parties included on the security questionnaire, and the full review



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of personal finances will include an assessment of the individual's assets, liabilities, income and expenditure.

That is all set out on the Cabinet Office website. As I say, we do not go into further details of the developed vetting process, either in general or for individuals, for reasons that you will understand, but we do give that rather comprehensive description of what developed vetting covers.

The important bit—and this is where we were getting to in my exchanges with other members of the Committee—is that that is, of course, a proactive process. The conflicts of interest process that we described is a self-declaration process; what I have just described is a process of proactively looking at records, not simply reacting to what the appointee or the candidate tells us.

Q274 Fleur Anderson: Where in that process is the conversation about what someone's interests are beyond that—the personal interests, where Epstein would have come up in the vetting process? There were a couple of investigations at the end of that list: is that likely to be where the conversation would come up? Also, what is the end product of that whole process? Is there one report?

Sir Chris Wormald: I will leave it to Sir Oliver to describe what happened in this particular case. We do not go into the details of what happens within the developed vetting process, either in general or for individuals, beyond what I have said.

Fleur Anderson: In general, in which part of those processes would the personal associations come up?

Sir Chris Wormald: It is as I have described: there is a detailed interview with an investigating officer, which covers all the information that I have listed.

Fleur Anderson: So in that detailed interview—and in the one with the referees as well, I presume. That could be where it came out, too.

Sir Chris Wormald: Again, I am not going to comment on what happened in an individual—

Fleur Anderson: But in general.

Sir Chris Wormald: In general, you would expect that any issues that arose out of the research done would then be picked up in the various interviews conducted in the way I have described.

Q275 Fleur Anderson: In general, what is the end product of all that vetting? Does it all get put into one report? Who receives that report?

Sir Chris Wormald: The report is received by the employing Department and employing line manager—in this case, that would be Sir Oliver—and then a decision is taken on whether the relevant level of security clearance is to be granted and what mitigations, if any, are required.

Q276 Fleur Anderson: Is that decision taken by Sir Olly or by you? As you hand over the report, do you have the recommendation, and then Sir Olly says yes?

Sir Oliver Robbins: May I cut in, Chris? In our case—it may be different in other places—almost all the over 8,000 UK-based people who work for us at the Foreign Office are subject to DV. We do not normally take those decisions at line manager level, let alone at permanent under-secretary level; we delegate the responsibility for receiving the report from UK security vetting to our personnel security team in the Foreign Office. Obviously, the vast majority of those are relatively straightforward. Ones that require more senior judgment, and potentially a discussion about managing and mitigating risks, are escalated appropriately.

Q277 Uma Kumaran: I am trying to gather my thoughts, because there is a lot that is coming our way. In reference to my earlier question, you have just set out a number of vetting processes, but did none of them flag that a well-publicised friendship with the world's most notorious paedophile might be a problem to the Government?

Sir Oliver Robbins: I think what Chris was getting at earlier—may I approach this chronologically? Back before Lord Mandelson was announced as the appointee, there was a process, which Chris will be happy to talk to, within the Cabinet Office to make sure that the Prime Minister was aware of Lord Mandelson and the issues around his appointment. There was then a process of clearing his conflicts of interest, which the employing Department oversaw, which we have talked about. In parallel with that process, we also went through the standard UK national security vetting process for DV. Of those processes, the one where we can confidently say that the relationship with Jeffrey Epstein was indeed surfaced was the first. As Chris has explained—

Chair: The due diligence one.

Sir Oliver Robbins: That's right. At the risk of being boring, we are not at liberty to say whether it would have come up during the national security vetting process. I would have been surprised to see it on a conflict of interest form, because that is more about offices, interests and assets that you hold that have a bearing on the Government's reputation.

Q278 Uma Kumaran: Do you think your due diligence and vetting process is fit for purpose, given what we are discussing?

Sir Chris Wormald: On your original question—we will cover this when we cover the due diligence exercise—as I put in the letter to the Committee, all public knowledge about Lord Mandelson from the open source due diligence that we did was included in the due diligence, including his relationship with Mr Epstein. Was that fit for purpose? Well, we believe it could be improved.

Q279 Uma Kumaran: That is an understatement, isn't it, Sir Chris?

Sir Chris Wormald: No. The issue over which Lord Mandelson was withdrawn from Washington was information—and the Prime Minister set



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this out very clearly—that was not available to us at the time that the due diligence was done. The Prime Minister has been on the record about this and has explained exactly why he took that decision.

So there are two issues here. There is the process—as I say, we believe the process can be improved; indeed, we have improved it—and there is what information was available at the time. The issues over which the ambassador was withdrawn from Washington were based on information that was not known at the time.

Q280 Uma Kumaran: Can I suggest, in the light of your answers—thank you, both—that perhaps associations with well-known paedophiles be flagged for any future appointments, because none of your processes seem to flag that as an issue?

Sir Chris Wormald: No, that is not correct. As you will see from my letter, Lord Mandelson's connections with Mr Epstein were flagged in the due diligence exercise that the Cabinet Office carried out.

Q281 Aphra Brandreth: I just want to touch on the due diligence and add a couple of quick questions regarding the earlier conversation. Since we are talking about what came up during the due diligence, publicly available information at the time was that Mandelson and Epstein had kept a notoriously close relationship and that in June 2009 Mandelson had stayed at Epstein's townhouse in Manhattan. That would have coincided with the time that Mandelson was UK Business Secretary, and also the time that Epstein was in prison for soliciting prostitution from an under-age girl—a child. Both the *FT* and *The Guardian* refer to further examples of Mandelson and Epstein's communications during 2009, 2010 and 2011. There are pictures of Mandelson shopping with Epstein in the Caribbean, which also emerged prior to Mandelson's appointment as ambassador, and the *Financial Times* and the *Daily Mail* in '23 and '22 reported on a photo that had emerged of Mandelson celebrating a birthday at Epstein's apartment in 2007. Those dates all occur after Epstein was charged in 2006 with soliciting prostitution, and after 2008 when he pleaded guilty to charges of soliciting prostitution from a person under the age of 18.

In my opinion, it is absolutely deplorable that we would have somebody with such an attitude towards women and girls in such an important and significant position, representing our country. At what point were questions raised about whether that was appropriate? Why does it seem that suddenly a small additional bit of information would tip the balance from it being, at one point, deemed appropriate to then being deemed not appropriate?

Sir Chris Wormald: The due diligence process has, effectively, two parts to it: there is the identification of information, and then there is judgment.

On the identification of information, which is the due diligence process that was run by the Cabinet Office, I refer you to the second bullet point in my letter to Simon and his Committee, which sets out the reputational risks that were identified in relation to Jeffrey Epstein, including the media reporting.



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There is then a judgment about whether to make the appointment or not. As I say, the Prime Minister has set out in quite some detail, in his media interviews, the judgment he took, and then the further information that came to light, I believe in September, which certainly the Prime Minister would not describe—and I do not think many other people would describe—as minor: the new and previously unknown emails that led to the decision to withdraw the ambassador to Washington.

Q282 Aphra Brandreth: So all the information that I read out was shared with the Prime Minister prior to his appointment and was considered not sufficient to cause concern about the appointment.

Sir Chris Wormald: It is the information set out in bullet 2 of my letter.

Aphra Brandreth: I have quite a lot of paperwork in front of me, so would you mind reading out bullet 2?

Sir Chris Wormald: “In the case of the former HMA Washington’s appointment, the report”—that is, the due diligence report—“included... A summary of his professional and financial relationships and an initial assessment of what steps may be required in order to resolve any potential conflicts of interest, in order to take up the role”.

Then the key bullet point is “A summary of reputational risks, including his previous resignations as a minister”—I think previously someone suggested he was sacked; I think in fact he resigned—“and his prior relationship with Jeffrey Epstein. This section includes direct extracts from media reporting and notes a general reputational risk. The only information which was not already in the public domain at the time is a reference to official records which have since been disclosed by the National Archives, which relate to a Tony Blair meeting with Epstein that was facilitated by the former Ambassador at the time... A list of the former Ambassador’s previous political and non-political roles; and... A section on internet searches which summarises news reporting available at the time.” That is what the due diligence exercise covered.

Aphra Brandreth: So I think the answer is yes, really, then.

Sir Chris Wormald: It is exactly as set out in my letter.

Chair: I am sorry to be so boring, but I am trying to keep a structure here, guys. Can I go on to Abtisam—let’s just try to get through that—and then we will move on to the due diligence process with Phil?

Abtisam Mohamed: My question relates directly to my colleague’s question. In terms of timescales, he was appointed on 20 December.

Sir Oliver Robbins: That was the date of announcement, I think.

Q283 Abtisam Mohamed: Were you asked to fast-track the vetting process? That is a very short timeframe to appoint somebody to such a senior position.



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Sir Oliver Robbins: There is provision within our—and I think most Departments’—arrangements with UK Security Vetting, which does the vetting process, such that we are allowed to ask for a number of priority clearances every year, to make sure that they jump the queue and are done earlier than others. We used that for Lord Mandelson. It does not mean that there is any difference in the process. It is a standard product that UKSV offers. So yes, it was faster than some people’s clearances will have been. That was not because the process was different; it was because we advanced him up the queue.

Q284 **Abtisam Mohamed:** In any of that process, was any part skipped, removed or stripped entirely?

Sir Oliver Robbins: No.

Q285 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Nothing was removed—okay. Do you think you had sufficient time to carry out meaningful checks?

Sir Oliver Robbins: What I can say to you, Ms Mohamed, is that I am absolutely confident that UKSV undertook the process in precisely its standard way, doing all the checks it would expect to do, and we had ample time to assess and decide on the basis of its work.

Q286 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Given that he eventually came into the position in February, were you satisfied at that point that the information that was already in the public domain would not cause any potential reputational embarrassment?

Sir Oliver Robbins: At the risk of sounding like a pedant, that would not have been a judgment for me to make as part of the vetting process. The important decision on that had already been taken some time before, when it was decided to appoint him.

Chair: Phil, some of the ground you were going to cover has already been covered, but do you mind filling in the holes?

Q287 **Phil Brickell:** Thank you, Chair. Most of my questions will be for Sir Chris. You spoke about your letter to the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which set out a little of the due diligence process that the Propriety and Ethics Team carries out. What is the purpose of the due diligence process?

Sir Chris Wormald: It is to inform decisions about reputational risk. It is very important to see the three processes working together. Open source due diligence is something that we regularly do for external appointments. It is what any excellent¹ journalist or parliamentary researcher could do: looks for the open source information about the individual and turns that into an easy-to-read report to inform the decision maker of the reputational risks you might run and might need to mitigate were you to make the appointment. It is not a decision-making thing, and it does not make a recommendation. It raises questions and it is then for the decision

¹ Note by witness: When saying “excellent journalist” I misspoke. What I meant to say was “investigatory journalist”.



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maker, which in this case were the Ministers, to decide if those are reputational risks that they are prepared to bear and what mitigations would be needed were the person to be appointed. That is very different from the security vetting service process we just described, which does lead to specific recommendations, which are then taken by the Department in question. It is to inform the decision maker of potential reputational risks.

Q288 Phil Brickell: Is it possible that somebody has due diligence done on them by the team in the Cabinet Office, and once that is concluded a decision is made that they do not then proceed through the vetting process?

Sir Chris Wormald: As I said, the two things are completely separate. However, it is certainly possible that there are occasions when somebody might look at a due diligence report and decide that they do not want to proceed.

Q289 Phil Brickell: What is the skillset of those conducting the due diligence done within the PET?

Sir Chris Wormald: It is the Propriety and Ethics Team in the Cabinet Office that normally does it; they have done this on a number of occasions and become very skilled at it. As I said, what they are doing is an open source search, very similar to the type that an investigative journalist, parliamentary researcher or anyone with the appropriate skills could do. There is nothing that goes into those due diligence reports—except in this instance for the one piece of information that I read out earlier—that is not publicly available information.

Q290 Chair: There is a skillset involved in winking out that information, but is there not also a skillset involved in asking questions, getting answers and getting the truth out? Is there not a skillset there?

Sir Chris Wormald: Our due diligence exercise, which we do in a large number of cases when we are appointing externally to senior roles, does not involve an interview with the individual. The interview with the individual comes as part of the processes that we were describing earlier. It is an open source search of the reputational issues relating to that individual. The individual is not brought in and questioned in that due diligence process. We described the processes in which people are interviewed previously.

Q291 Phil Brickell: In your letter to the Chair of PACAC on 30 October, you mentioned that “a standard requirement for due diligence to be carried out” will be introduced. What does that mean and why was there not a standard requirement beforehand?

Sir Chris Wormald: Before, a set of checks were recommended for this type of appointment—we have just described those—and that had been the precedent for quite some time. Those checks were on conflicts of interest, security vetting as appropriate and the due diligence exercise. After looking at this case—this is set out in my letter—we believe that that process can be strengthened and we have published new guidance, which



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was attached to my letter. That guidance will be applied across the civil service—Sir Oliver is introducing similar arrangements for ambassadors—to have a much more clearly set out process. That process is set out clearly in the guidance that we have published and gives exactly the steps that ought to be undertaken for any direct ministerial appointment, whether as an ambassador or not. I will not read the whole thing out, because it is several pages, but the process is set out for you in that guidance, which is on gov.uk.

Q292 Phil Brickell: To be clear, are we saying that before the new process for direct ministerial appointments was instituted, there was no standard guidance on what due diligence was required?

Sir Chris Wormald: No, there was guidance, which largely sets out what I have said—the checks that should be done. We thought that that guidance could be strengthened and we have done that quite considerably in the guidance that we have just published.

Q293 Chair: Can we see the old guidance?

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes, I think it is on gov.uk as well.

Chair: No, it's not.

Sir Chris Wormald: I am pretty sure it is.

Chair: No, it's not.

Sir Chris Wormald: I found it there. Anyway, we will post it to you.

Q294 Chair: We are incapable of finding it, so could you send us a copy?

Sir Chris Wormald: I am more than happy to send it to you, but I have set out the main changes in my letter, along with the new guidance—again, in the interests of time, I will not read that out.

Q295 Phil Brickell: We talked about departmental responsibilities earlier. As I understand it, the Cabinet Office did the due diligence checks.

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes.

Q296 Phil Brickell: Why was that done by the Cabinet Office and not by the appointing Department, the Foreign Office?

Sir Chris Wormald: Because in this case the appointing Minister was the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office is the Department of the Prime Minister.

Q297 Phil Brickell: Is that something that will be looked at in the future: making sure that there is a handover of information from the Cabinet Office to the Foreign Office, where there is a direct appointment?

Sir Chris Wormald: I do not believe that was an issue in this case, or indeed in any other cases that I am aware of. What shows up in due diligence is all publicly available information and is therefore, by definition,

available to any other Department. As I have described, in the security vetting process all that information would be identified again in any case.

Q298 **Chair:** But in the future, direct ministerial appointments will have to have due diligence done by the Department that has decided that it wants to do direct ministerial; it is not going to be done by you—isn't that right?

Sir Chris Wormald: We do it on a practical basis, so very frequently PET acts on behalf of another Department.

Q299 **Chair:** Sorry, I am relying on this guidance, and in the guidance it says that the Department is responsible.

Sir Chris Wormald: There is a difference between the responsibility and who physically does it. The responsibility is on the appointing Minister and appointing Department. Whether that Department happens to have people with the skillset that you were describing earlier, or whether they wish to commission the Cabinet Office or someone else to do it on their behalf, the accountability for commissioning it, receiving the information and taking the decision is on the appointing Department.

Q300 **Chair:** So the Department will not be able to point fingers at the Cabinet Office; it will have to take responsibility.

Sir Chris Wormald: I do not think that there has been any finger pointing in this case. We have described the processes that were gone through.

Chair: Before we move on, Dan, Fleur and Aphra have been waiting for some time.

Q301 **Dan Carden:** Sir Olly, you said that reports were submitted to a vetting team in the FCDO. Are those reports received by a vetting team for all staff who have developed vetting?

Sir Oliver Robbins: We have a personnel security team that is responsible for understanding and setting policy around personnel security for the Department as a whole, including receiving recommendations.

Q302 **Dan Carden:** And those recommendations can be escalated?

Sir Oliver Robbins: They can.

Q303 **Dan Carden:** In your time at the FCDO, how many have been escalated?

Sir Oliver Robbins: I do not have numbers on that and, to be honest, I think this falls under Chris's general warning that the further we get into this, the more difficult it is to maintain the integrity of the vetting system.

Q304 **Dan Carden:** Was Lord Mandelson's appointment escalated?

Sir Oliver Robbins: I certainly cannot comment on that, I'm afraid, for the same reason.

Fleur Anderson: It is hard, having read the new document, to see what the changes are because I have not read the old document, but there is a process in here for a fireside chat. In a direct ministerial appointment in



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tier 1, if at a certain stage concerns are raised, there is the provision that “In reaching a decision, the Minister, or a senior official...may wish to conduct a ‘fireside chat’ or discuss the requirements” of the role. Does the fireside chat mean that it is off the record? What is that part of the process? Was it held with Lord Mandelson?

Sir Chris Wormald: No, what we are trying to do here—Sir Oliver touched on this earlier—is to replicate for direct ministerial appointments exactly what we do for advertised appointments. When we are doing very senior appointments—permanent secretaries and so on—it is reasonably standard practice for the Minister to hold a fireside chat with the individual in question. That is not part of the decision-making process, which is why it is not described in that way. For senior civil servants, a civil service commissioner would be present to ensure that the process was being followed properly. We do that when we externally advertise a job and have several candidates, so we are replicating that for direct ministerial appointments.

Likewise, as we described earlier—this is the other big change—when there is a panel interview, questions about conflicts of interest or any other issues that the candidate wishes to bring attention to are part of the interview. They are therefore recorded, and the answers are recorded as part of the interview process. We are replicating that for direct ministerial appointments. That part of what would normally be the interview process will take place in direct ministerial appointment situations, too.

What we are really trying to do with our new guidance is, as I say, to replicate for direct appointments all the processes that go on for advertised appointments and bring the two completely into line. That does not give you perfect defence, for the reasons we discussed earlier. It is still based on the information that is available at the time, but we take the view that there ought to be consistency in the level of rigour between the two types of appointment—advertised and direct. While that doesn’t create a system that will never make mistakes or fail, if it is appropriate for one, it is appropriate for the other.

Q305 **Fleur Anderson:** Did the fireside chat part of it come up in Lord Mandelson’s appointment, and if it did, what part did it happen in?

Sir Chris Wormald: No. This is something that we have added, as I say, to replicate what we do for advertised appointments.

Q306 **Aphra Brandreth:** I just want to try to understand this a bit more, because to many people it feels like common sense was perhaps thrown out the window. Publicly available information about vetting says that the vetting interviewer will ask about friends and associations, so one might assume that, as part of that process—I appreciate you are not going to tell us the detail of it—things came up about Mandelson’s relationship with Jeffrey Epstein.

We are aware that publicly available information about Mandelson’s relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, some of which I have already read out, will have come up in the due diligence process. I am just wondering



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whether any of this information at any point and in any way triggered anybody at the Cabinet Office or at the FCDO to ask any further questions to establish the full context of the former ambassador's relationship to Epstein.

Sir Chris Wormald: As I said, there are two things that happen in these processes. There is the process of fact finding, which is what I described, and there is the process of judgment as to whether the issues that have arisen are material to the appointment. The issues you are raising are in the second category. As I say, the Prime Minister has already explained in really quite some detail—in interviews and elsewhere—what he did, why he did it and why he withdrew.

Q307 **Chair:** That really isn't good enough. It really isn't.

Sir Chris Wormald: Well, I'm sorry, but that is the position.

Q308 **Chair:** Let me come in behind Aphra on this. At the time when there was due diligence, when you were looking at what is publicly available, if you had come before us, we would have looked on the internet—we would have googled—and we would have found that Channel 4 had done a documentary, "The Prince & the Paedophile", that clearly highlighted Mandelson's links with Epstein. We would have given consideration to the *Financial Times* and *Guardian* reports in June 2023 that referenced the JP Morgan internal investigation. In those reports, what was most damning of all was that Epstein was sentenced in 2008 to 18 months' imprisonment for soliciting an underage girl, and Peter Mandelson goes to stay in his townhouse in Manhattan in 2009. At that time, Peter Mandelson was the Business Secretary. So we have the Business Secretary staying in the townhouse in Manhattan of someone convicted of paedophilia. My question is: you find this out—presumably you did, and presumably you have a researcher who can do what my researcher did—but did anyone ask him about this, and when?

Sir Chris Wormald: As I say, I have probably gone as far in answering this question as I can. The Prime Minister has described, in quite some detail, the decisions he took and why. The questions you are raising are about the judgment part of this exercise, which—

Q309 **Chair:** I am not asking questions about that. What I am asking about is not the judgment, because, as you said, it was not your judgment but the judgment of the Prime Minister. What I want to know is: was the Prime Minister let down? Was the Prime Minister told that Mandelson had stayed in Epstein's flat in Manhattan in 2009, when Epstein was serving 18 months for paedophilia? Was the Prime Minister told that, and was he told what Mandelson's answer to that challenge was? Because if the Prime Minister was not told that, we can hardly pass the blame on to the Prime Minister for not using his judgment. What information was he given?

Sir Chris Wormald: Nobody is passing blame anywhere. I am simply factually describing what happened, and that question is also one the Prime Minister has been asked and has answered in the media. I believe he has said he does not believe he was let down, either by the process or

by anyone involved in the process. I believe that was his answer on 15 September on Channel 4 news.

Q310 Aphra Brandreth: Did the FCDO have a different view about who should be recommended for the posting?

Sir Oliver Robbins: By the time we are describing, it was clear that the Prime Minister wanted to make this appointment himself. Therefore, I understand, the FCDO was informed of his decision and acted on it, and, via the Foreign Secretary, sought and obtained the King's approval for the appointment. In this case, as Chris explained, the Prime Minister took advice and formed a view himself, and we then acted on that view.

Q311 Edward Morello: Just so we are clear, the due diligence report that was produced by the Cabinet Office goes to the appointing Minister, which in this case is the Prime Minister. So the Prime Minister received that report, which should have contained all the information pertaining to Lord Mandelson's relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, according to your own submission to PACAC, which said that it included reference to his prior relationship with Jeffrey Epstein. So the Prime Minister got a report that outlined that relationship. Then, as the appointing Minister, he makes the decision on whether this person is suitable for that appointment based on that report.

Sir Chris Wormald: I will answer in the general rather than on the specifics of the case. I have set out in my letter exactly what the due diligence report covers. The process for any direct ministerial appointment is that the report is shared with the appointing Minister and they take the decision. Just to correct something that you said—

Q312 Edward Morello: I appreciate you are talking in the general, but to the specifics, your own letter says that the due diligence report included reference to his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein. And you also confirmed that the report goes to the appointing Minister, who in this case is the Prime Minister.

Chair: And "A section on internet searches which summarises news reporting available at the time."

Edward Morello: Even if we are talking in the general, the specific in this case is that the Prime Minister did receive a report that highlighted that relationship, and it was up to him to make a decision based on the information as he read it.

Sir Chris Wormald: For a direct ministerial appointment, that is the process.

Q313 Chair: It is really important to be clear about this—I am sorry to keep banging on about it—but was the Prime Minister told that Peter Mandelson had stayed at Epstein's Manhattan townhouse in 2009, when Epstein was in prison for soliciting an under-age girl?

Sir Chris Wormald: I have said as much as I am going to about the content of the due diligence report, which is set out in my letter.



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Chair: Why? Why can't you tell us that?

Sir Chris Wormald: For the long-standing reason that we protect advice that goes to the Prime Minister. I have actually gone a long way in describing what the due diligence report covered, as set out in my letter, and that is as far as I can go.

Q314 **Chair:** Can you give us a list of the articles? When you refer to the news reporting available at the time, can you give us the list of the news reports that you sent to the Prime Minister?

Sir Chris Wormald: I have set out in my letter as far as I can go. If the Committee is requesting further information, I am quite happy to take the question away and see if there are other things that can be shared. But as I say, I have set out in my letter the information that I can currently make available.

Q315 **Chair:** Question No. 1 is: did you tell the Prime Minister about Mandelson staying in the Manhattan townhouse when Epstein was in jail? If you cannot answer that, or cannot give us the answer that we want, then what media reports did you give to the Prime Minister so that he could at least read it for himself?

Sir Chris Wormald: I will consider whether there is further information that can be shared and write to the Committee.

Q316 **Dan Carden:** Sir Chris, you have quoted the Prime Minister saying that he was not told when he was interviewed on Channel 4 News, but it seems to me that you are telling us the opposite.

Sir Chris Wormald: No, I think the part of the interview that you are referring to is the information that subsequently came to light—the new emails that no one was aware of at the point of appointment. I think the part of the interview you are referring to is when he is discussing that.

Q317 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Sir Chris and Sir Olly, I would like to move on to the new information that became available, which led to the departure of Lord Mandelson as ambassador. To be clear, did he resign or was he sacked?

Sir Oliver Robbins: He was withdrawn from post. He did not resign.

Sir John Whittingdale: He did not resign, so he was sacked.

Sir Oliver Robbins: As I say, he was withdrawn from post.

Q318 **Sir John Whittingdale:** The new information was contained in emails that were made available to Bloomberg. Was that the first knowledge that you had of their existence?

Sir Oliver Robbins: When this issue arose back in September, that was the first I had heard of such emails.

Q319 **Sir John Whittingdale:** So the US Administration that had the emails had never made available any information to you—it was only through the

media that you found out?

Sir Oliver Robbins: I certainly was not given information by the US Government, no.

Q320 Sir John Whittingdale: Bloomberg obtained the emails, I think on the Tuesday evening, and the Foreign Office then analysed them, but they did not tell the Prime Minister until after he had appeared in the House of Commons the following day to express his confidence in Lord Mandelson.

Sir Oliver Robbins: We received the material, and we asked some questions about that material, which the Prime Minister has commented on in his public remarks. I cannot speak to exactly what he saw at what point, Sir John, but Chris and I were in constant contact about it, and I was briefing the Foreign Secretary as to how we were pursuing the case.

Q321 Sir John Whittingdale: But it must have been apparent to you before the Prime Minister got up at 12 pm on Wednesday that this was pretty explosive. Did somebody not say to No. 10, "Hold on. Before you express your complete confidence in Lord Mandelson, there is something here you might like to be aware of"?

Sir Oliver Robbins: Chris may be able to say a bit more about the process by which the Prime Minister is briefed for Prime Minister's questions. The fact of this media inquiry, which I obviously knew about, was also known to No. 10. Chris and I had discussed it. The Foreign Secretary, Chris and I were clear that this needed to be dealt with sensitively and as a management issue. In the context and tone of this hearing this may sound naive—forgive me for that—but I needed to behave towards Lord Mandelson as an employee to whom I owed a duty of care. He was in an extremely exposed position, and I had to make sure that I was thinking about and looking after the way in which we were dealing with him, and dealing with him fairly and transparently. The way we did that was to make sure that we were asking him firm, rigorous and clear questions about the material, but we were not seeking to involve Ministers in the detail of those questions and how we were approaching it, to avoid any sense that he was being treated differently from other employees.

Q322 Sir John Whittingdale: So you are saying that to protect Lord Mandelson, you gave no indication to No. 10 before Prime Minister's questions that you had come across information that might cause serious doubt about the appropriateness of his position.

Sir Oliver Robbins: Correct me if I am wrong, Chris, but I think the Prime Minister is on the record saying that he was aware there was a media inquiry before Prime Minister's questions. He knew that we were in touch with Lord Mandelson about these issues. As I say, I was not involved in briefing him specifically for Prime Minister's questions, but I do not think it would be fair to say that No. 10 was unaware that we were in this dialogue with Lord Mandelson on this issue.

Sir John Whittingdale: But they then said that new information became available after the Prime Minister had expressed his confidence.



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Sir Oliver Robbins: The emails were only published later on that day. At the point when the Prime Minister stood up at Prime Minister's questions, Lord Mandelson had not yet had an opportunity to comment himself on the points that had been raised with him about the veracity and risks—

Q323 **Sir John Whittingdale:** But you had not told the Prime Minister, at that stage, that there were all these emails in which Lord Mandelson was expressing his continuing support and friendship for Jeffrey Epstein.

Sir Oliver Robbins: No, I had not personally spoken to the Prime Minister about it.

Sir John Whittingdale: What about your Department? Your Department briefs No. 10 prior to Prime Minister's questions.

Sir Oliver Robbins: As I say, I was not involved in briefing the Prime Minister for Prime Minister's questions. As I think the Prime Minister is on the record himself as saying on 15 September, he was aware of the existence of the media inquiry, and he knew that official inquiries were being pursued.

Q324 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Sir Chris, do you have anything to add?

Sir Chris Wormald: No, Sir Oliver is completely correct. Again, the Prime Minister has answered these questions in detail in his media interviews, including both what he knew before PMQs and why he took the decision after PMQs. He does say—I am quoting exactly—that "in retrospect, it would have been better if I had been shown the details of the material before PMQs."

Q325 **Sir John Whittingdale:** This goes back to what the Chair was saying earlier. The Prime Minister is under fire essentially because the Foreign Office did not properly inform him.

Sir Chris Wormald: No, I do not think that is true at all. As we have said, the Prime Minister was aware that there was an issue, but not the nature of the issue. The investigations into the nature of that issue were under way at the time; it was an extremely fast-moving situation. The situation clarified itself later that evening and the Prime Minister took the decision that he took. As the Prime Minister says—

Q326 **Chair:** I am sorry, but is this not the point? You can tell the Prime Minister there is an issue that is being clarified, but it gives him no idea as to how serious that issue is. If you say, "Oh, there is an issue and we are clarifying it," it will mean that the Prime Minister is likely to say—one would hope he would say this about everybody in the end, as a good employer—"I have confidence in my staff." No one has told him anything other than that, but you had the information. You were keeping it to yourselves and letting the Prime Minister down, were you not?

Sir Chris Wormald: No, I do not think that is the case at all. You make reference to good employers, and I am sure everybody on the Committee does this with their own staff. If there are issues, you wait until you have investigated them properly, certainly before you say anything about them



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in public. As Sir Oliver says, although he is a very high-profile individual, Lord Mandelson deserves to be treated as any other employee. At that point, you had some allegations form in a media organisation that clearly needed—

Sir John Whittingdale: It was not allegations; it was copies of emails.

Sir Chris Wormald: They needed to be looked into in the course of that day. That was completed, and the Prime Minister—

Q327 **Sir John Whittingdale:** You must have realised that the contents of those emails were explosive—that they completely changed the perception.

Chair: I am sorry to come on to this again, but it was consistent with him staying in Epstein's townhouse when Epstein was in jail for paedophilia.

Sir Chris Wormald: As the Prime Minister has said, the emails that came to light were game-changing in terms of what was known.

Sir John Whittingdale: They were game-changing, but you did not give any indication to the Prime Minister of their existence.

Sir Chris Wormald: As I say, he was briefed on the existence of an issue, but at that point the investigations into those emails had not been completed.

Q328 **Uma Kumaran:** I used to prepare the now Prime Minister for Prime Minister's questions when he was Leader of the Opposition. My question relates to that. Did you not think that it was part of your role to brief, if not the Prime Minister, the people who prepare him for Prime Minister's questions that Bloomberg News's allegations were pretty serious? He was going to be on live telly expressing full confidence in one of the employees of the Foreign Office.

Sir Chris Wormald: I do not personally get involved in the briefings for Prime Minister's questions. I would expect that major issues—

Uma Kumaran: Did the severity of this issue not warrant an intervention?

Sir Chris Wormald: As I say, I do not get involved in briefings for Prime Minister's questions. You would expect, given that it was a major news story at the time, that it would have come up in the way that you describe. I come back to the point that the Chair made: while investigations are under way, you have a duty of care towards your employees about what you say in public. As I have said, the Prime Minister has been very clear that he believes with the benefit of hindsight that it would have been better if he had seen the emails prior to PMQs.

Q329 **Aphra Brandreth:** I want to clarify exactly what information had been shared with No. 10. You have expressed that it was shared that there was an issue. As I understand it, a letter or email communication was received from Bloomberg that included excerpts of the emails between Mandelson and Epstein. Was that letter or email shared in its entirety with No. 10

prior to PMQs?

Sir Chris Wormald: The FCDO had received—you had received—information from Bloomberg—

Sir Oliver Robbins: The story I can swear to is that we—the FCDO headquarters in London—received the communication from Bloomberg from the British embassy in Washington in advance of PMQs. It is on that basis that we went back to Lord Mandelson and posed him questions about the veracity of the allegations. Excuse me for reaching across a couple of questions here, but at the risk of sounding both pedantic and naive, we did not even know for sure at that stage that Lord Mandelson accepted that these emails were truly his emails. We owed it to him to at least seek to establish that he recognised the emails and that he thought it was plausible that he had sent them. We had that information before PMQs. It was on that basis that we went back to Lord Mandelson and posed questions to him in advance of PMQs.

Q330 **Aphra Brandreth:** May I clarify? Did you share that information that you had received as an email with No. 10 in its entirety? Not in a conversation and not just, “There’s an issue”; did you forward or share that email?

Sir Oliver Robbins: I personally did not.

Aphra Brandreth: But did somebody from the FCDO?

Sir Oliver Robbins: Not to my knowledge.

Q331 **Aphra Brandreth:** Perhaps you can say if you shared that information with anybody beyond yourself and the people that it was sent to.

Sir Oliver Robbins: I sought the kind of advice that you would expect on an issue like this: HR and legal. I made sure that my boss was aware of what I was doing and the way I was approaching it. I also made sure that my political boss, the Foreign Secretary, was aware that I thought this was best handled as a management issue. That was the basis on which I went back to Lord Mandelson.

Q332 **Aphra Brandreth:** Is that the same as your understanding, Sir Chris?

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes, and I return to the point that we are talking about our employee here, so when you—

Aphra Brandreth: But presumably he was also the Prime Minister’s employee.

Sir Chris Wormald: No, he’s an—

Aphra Brandreth: We have discussed the fact that he was the person who made the decision to appoint Lord Mandelson.

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes, but he was an employee of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office as a civil servant at this point. As I say, you are all aware, from being employers yourselves, that when you receive a set of allegations, you give people the chance to reply—to say,



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"No, I didn't send those emails," "Those emails are not correct" or whatever—and that process, as Sir Oliver has described, was under way at the point of PMQs but had not completed. But I return to the Prime Minister's statement on Channel 4 News, where he makes his view clear.

Q333 **Chair:** With hindsight, do you think that it was a mistake to take this primarily as a managerial issue and not a political issue?

Sir Chris Wormald: No, because as I say, although this is a high-profile individual with a political past, he was also an employee; he had all the rights of an employee and he deserved to be given the same opportunities to rebut accusations as any other employee. It obviously is a political question as well, in that it was raised in the political field—by journalists and by the Opposition at PMQs. So it is clearly both, but there is no point when we can say, "This person ceases to have the rights of an employee and to be dealt with with duties of care and what everyone would expect as they are an employee." At no point is that disengaged.

Q334 **Chair:** All we are asking you is: why on earth didn't you just alert the Prime Minister to the seriousness of the allegations?

Sir Chris Wormald: I don't think there is very much we can add to what we have said already. He was alerted to the issue. He has made it clear that with hindsight, he wishes he had seen the detail of the allegations before PMQs.

Q335 **Edward Morello:** The problem that I am dealing with and, I suspect, a lot of people out there are struggling with is the idea that the emails constituted materially different information that would have resulted in Lord Mandelson not being appointed. I certainly look at this, and hopefully any rational person would, and say: you have somebody who has a long, close and deep relationship with a known paedophile, but that still makes them suitable for the appointment. Staying with them in their townhouse while they are under investigation and being prosecuted for being a paedophile—

Chair: Sentenced! There was an 18-month prison sentence.

Edward Morello: And that still makes you qualified for this appointment. But maintaining the relationship afterwards suddenly makes you unsuitable for the appointment. All this could have been avoided if at any point anyone had turned around and said, "Do you know what? Actually, let's not appoint somebody who has a really close, known relationship with a convicted paedophile."

Sir Chris Wormald: As I say, the Prime Minister has answered all these questions, including—he set out in quite some detail—why the information that came to light in September was substantively different from that that was available at the time of appointment.

Q336 **Sir John Whittingdale:** I have two further questions. Sir Olly, you have made it clear that Lord Mandelson was withdrawn from his position; he did not resign. Is he still on the civil service payroll?

Sir Oliver Robbins: No.

Sir John Whittingdale: He is not?

Sir Oliver Robbins: No, he's not.

Q337 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Is he receiving any kind of settlement or pay-off?

Sir Oliver Robbins: We have dealt with him—as I hope you would expect—in accordance with his contract.

Sir John Whittingdale: So what is the answer?

Sir Oliver Robbins: It being an employment contract, that is confidential between us, but we have dealt with him in the way he contracted with us.

Q338 **Sir John Whittingdale:** But he was sacked, so is he still entitled, under his contract, to a payment?

Sir Oliver Robbins: I am sorry, Sir John, but as I say, the way in which we deal with individual employees' termination under their contract must remain confidential between us, so I am not at liberty to say whether a settlement was made in his case. All I can tell you is that it was done absolutely in accordance with his written contract with us.

Sir John Whittingdale: So the Foreign Office is not going to give any information as to whether payment was made to him.

Sir Oliver Robbins: Any implications of his termination will be reported in our annual report and accounts, but termination payments below a particular threshold, which I think is £300,000, do not get itemised. Those above that threshold generally do. We will follow our normal process.

Q339 **Fleur Anderson:** I think we can all conclude that the system failed, so we are now trying to look at whether we can trust the system in future, considering the changes and what went wrong along the way. The part of the system I want to look at, one last time, is the part between the appointment and starting work, and then everything being found out. Did Lord Mandelson at any stage come back to say there had been changes? When I was a Minister, I filled in all these forms, and at the end it said, "You have to go to your permanent under-secretary if anything changes along the way. It is over to you." There were clearly changes in what came out rather than what actually happened, but did Lord Mandelson ever come back to you to say, "There have been some changes along the way" in respect of the relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, or anything else?

Sir Oliver Robbins: I am afraid the nature of my management conversations with Peter Mandelson have to stay between us. What I would say is that nothing was disclosed to me that gave me cause for concern about the decisions we have discussed today.

Q340 **Fleur Anderson:** Okay. Which part of the process do you think went wrong the most? We went through the different parts—the due diligence, the security vetting, the additional vetting, no fireside chat and the reliance on someone having to disclose after that—so which part needs to



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be changed the most?

Sir Oliver Robbins: Hopefully it is pretty strongly implicit in my letter to the Chair that the way I have agreed with the Foreign Secretary that we will take account of the Cabinet Office's guidance on direct ministerial appointments, and the way we will formalise the way in which this process is done for any future cases, implies pretty strongly the areas where we would want to do things differently.

Q341 **Chair:** That takes us neatly on to something that I think is missing from your letter to us: if you are going to formalise the process, it is our strong view that, between the appointment and someone taking up their post, there should be a training period. We, like many other Committees, believe that when it comes to the direct ministerial appointment of ambassadors, the relevant Committee should be given the opportunity of questioning such people. Can I give you the arguments? PACAC interviews the chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life; the Culture, Media and Sport Committee interviews the chairs of Ofcom, the BBC and the Charity Commission; the Treasury Committee interviews everybody who is going to be on the Monetary Policy Committee. We are asking—we thought we had an agreement on this from the former Foreign Secretary—that anyone who is a political appointment to an ambassadorial role comes before this Committee before they begin the job.

The former Foreign Secretary said that Lord Mandelson was going to come before us, and then he never did. To make matters worse, there was briefing that we had had an opportunity to quiz him over breakfast in Washington. From our recollection, that was 15 minutes, when he was on the phone, and other people were in the room anyway, so it was hardly the time for us to ask him questions. Do you not think that, if you are going to improve the process, you should include us and our good sense in questioning some of the people who might be given political appointments in the future? At least our questions, and the answers, whether they are truthful or not, would be on the record.

Sir Oliver Robbins: Thank you, Chair. I read and, more importantly, the Foreign Secretary took note of what you said in the House about this, and I promise that we have thought about it very seriously. The difference between these appointments and the ones that you lay out is that, with respect, the list you gave me are independent office holders. These are people who are mainly created by statute to take public decisions on behalf of the people.

The appointments that we are talking about today and, indeed, in the wider civil service—as Chris can talk to—are appointments for people who operate under the hand of Ministers. They do not have a separate constitutional or statutory authority. Our Ministers' view is that that distinction needs to be preserved: that whatever someone's background and by whatever process someone is appointed, a confirmatory hearing, though I know you have not used that word, does not work for these appointments when they are speaking under the authority of Ministers.



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What the Foreign Secretary is completely committed to—I am too, for what it is worth—is that, where this Committee wants to hear from heads of mission, by whatever route they have been appointed, we should do our best to make sure that, after they have taken up their posting, they are available to do that. The reason I say “after they have taken up their posting” is that there may be a slight extra difference with diplomatic appointments, because, as this Committee will know well from your travels and conversations, there can only be one ambassador at a time. If there is a full and thoughtful hearing between a designated ambassador and this Committee while they are as announced in the public domain as going, but there is a sitting high commissioner or ambassador at post, the risk for HMG is that that makes it very awkward for His Majesty’s representative to do their job.

My Ministers will continue to make sure that, wherever possible, we meet this Committee’s needs for briefings and hearings with individual senior heads of mission, where those are important to you, but I don’t think they can go as far as you are asking.

Q342 Chair: This was not a problem when the previous Committee interviewed Sir Ed Llewellyn, and it was not a problem when previous Committees interviewed Baroness Amos. There have been political appointments in the past. A political appointment is different—and, given that it is a political appointment, it is right for the public to see why there has been a political appointment as opposed to a civil servant being given a particular position.

As I say, the appointments process has hardly been ideal until now. You are looking for changes that could make it better: we would have googled; we would have asked him questions and we would have got some answers. Truthful or not, those answers would be before the public. We would be in a much better position than we are now if you had just included us, as you said you were going to.

Sir Oliver Robbins: Your basic point about making sure that, in how we do any such appointments in future, candidates or appointees are given opportunities on the record to disclose to us, or a panel of us, any future reputational vulnerabilities is very important, and I completely agree with it. That is partly why I wrote to you separately, following on from Chris’s letter to PACAC.

Where Ministers are in a different place, Chair, is that—my recollection is that Ed Llewellyn came before this Committee after he had taken up his post as HMA Paris, not before—we are anxious about confusion to the host Government. It could undermine the position of the existing head of mission if somebody is before this Committee doing their best to expound the Government’s view about the importance of the relationship and the issues—in often big and complex relationships, for our most senior appointments—but there is someone sitting at post, attempting to conduct that relationship, who is a different person.

Q343 Chair: Okay. I am negotiating here. If that is what you insist, we want to



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have them within the first three months. When we were told that Lord Mandelson could not come before he takes up the post, we were promised that he would come as soon as he was back in Britain. He was in Britain a lot, and we never saw him. He never came before the Committee, and we could not hold the Foreign Office to the promise that Lord Mandelson was going to appear before the Committee. I would like an undertaking from you today that at least, if there are any further political appointments to ambassadorial roles, the Foreign Affairs Committee gets to speak to them within the first three months of their having the job.

Sir Oliver Robbins: I cannot give you that guarantee, but only, Chair, because, as you know—

Chair: You're not making any friends here!

Sir Oliver Robbins: As you know, decisions about whether I—let alone ambassadors—appear before you are for my Secretary of State and not for me. I hear you clearly, and you will of course have any opportunity to quiz the Foreign Secretary herself on some of these issues before too long.

Chair: All right—well, we will ask her. We have a final question, about the Chinese, from Richard.

Q344 **Richard Foord:** Reflecting on lessons learned, and thinking about these direct ministerial appointments, we have reflected today that the Government made changes last month to the process for making direct ministerial appointments, yet we have learned that the new process has actually introduced a so-called fireside chat between the political appointee and the Minister who appoints them. It sounds as though it is almost becoming more cosy and less transparent.

Sir Chris Wormald: No, that is not true at all.

Q345 **Richard Foord:** Well, we have Sir Ed Llewellyn, who is currently undertaking his second diplomatic posting, in Rome, when it says that by rights these things ought to be appointed for a specific term—I think the wording is “the standard posting length...or until the end of the Parliament, whichever is shorter”. Was Sir Ed not subject to the diplomatic service code, which already said that political appointees should only undertake one posting?

Sir Oliver Robbins: Lord Llewellyn's appointment was reconfirmed by the incoming Foreign Secretary after the general election. Unusually, in partisan terms, he was a political appointee of this Labour Government from July 2024.

Q346 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Sir Olly, can I ask you a separate question? It has been recently reported that you have visited Beijing. Can you tell us what the purpose of the visit was, and did the subject of the embassy come up?

Sir Oliver Robbins: Yes, it was my first ever visit to China, which was an important experience for me. Obviously, it is one of our largest networks around the world. The purpose of my visit was to see the embassy in



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Beijing and talk to the team there, and to have engagements with the authorities in Beijing. I then went on to Shenzhen, and was looked after by our consulate in Guangzhou. I then spent a really valuable last leg of the trip in Hong Kong, seeing that, despite all the difficulties—they are, of course, legion—the UK has a different, interesting and potentially unique relationship with China through Hong Kong.

The purpose of my visit was, of course, partly to educate myself. We cannot escape the importance of China in the modern world. It is the second largest economy and so on—you will know all the statistics. Pastorally, it was very important to me. This is a big chunk of my staff overseas; I do not want to be impolitic, but it is a chunk of my staff who face unusual pressures. I wanted to understand those pressures and hear from them myself about some of those pressures—

Sir John Whittingdale: Did you meet Chinese officials while you were there?

Sir Oliver Robbins: All sorts of pressures, Sir John, which I will not go into in this—

Q347 **Sir John Whittingdale:** I understand that, but did you talk to the Chinese?

Sir Oliver Robbins: I raised some of those issues myself with the Chinese authorities while I was there. The Chinese authorities, as is firmly in the public domain, are very focused on their planning application for their own embassy in London. They raised those issues with me while I was there, but the purpose of my visit was quite a lot broader.

Sir Chris Wormald: I know that you know this, Sir John, but obviously, the planning decision is a quasi-judicial decision for the relevant Secretary of State.

Q348 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Can I ask one last question of you, Sir Chris? You will be aware that there has been quite a lot of speculation about your own position. Do you expect to remain in post for the foreseeable future?

Sir Chris Wormald: I certainly hope so. You never want to read stuff in the press. As you and, I expect, all members of the Committee know, that is the price of public life at the moment. I expect that various members of the Committee have had considerably more unpleasant things written about them, but you go on with the job. Media speculation is exactly what it is, and I am sure Sir Olly would agree that our job is to get on with the job for which the taxpayer pays. That is what I will be doing.

Sir Oliver Robbins: Hear, hear.

Q349 **Aphra Brandreth:** I just want to go back to the question that Sir John asked about the Chinese embassy. A spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs seemed to threaten the UK last month, if their super-embassy planning application were not approved. They said, "We once again call on the UK to fulfil its obligation and honour its commitments at once, otherwise the consequences arising therefrom shall be borne by the



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UK side.” In those conversations or meetings that you might have had when you were out there, did they indicate what those consequences arising might be?

Sir Oliver Robbins: No, not with any clarity. They are clearly very focused on it—and I am not surprised; they have made a big investment there. It is important to them, and of course at some level it is important to us that they have a serious ability to represent themselves here in the UK. That is in our interests. Although the planning application is, as Chris has reminded us, completely separate from our own concerns, to make sure that our platform in Beijing is well supported, it is in our interests that they understand that we want that properly established and looked after as well.

I am not surprised that they are very focused on it. They did not make any specific threats along those lines—of course, had they done so, I would simply have reminded them that that question is for the Housing Secretary and not for me.

Chair: Unless anyone has any other questions, that is it. I will finish by thanking both of you very much for coming; it has been a really important session. I hereby close the session.