



Constitution Committee

Corrected oral evidence: 2023 UK-Overseas Territories Joint Declaration

Tuesday 13 January 2026

11 am

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Members present: Lord Strathclyde (The Chair); Baroness Andrews; Lord Bellamy; Lord Burnett of Maldon; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Griffiths of Burry Port; Baroness Hamwee; Baroness Laing of Elderslie; Lord Murphy of Torfaen; Lord Waldegrave of North Hill.

Evidence Session No. 2

Heard in Public

Questions 14 - 26

Witnesses

I: Stephen Doughty MP, Minister of State for Europe, North America and Overseas Territories, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; Robbie Bulloch, Director for Overseas Territories and Polar, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

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Examination of witnesses

Stephen Doughty and Robbie Bulloch.

Q14 **The Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the House of Lords Constitution Committee. Today we hear from Stephen Doughty MP, the Minister of State for Europe, North America and Overseas Territories. He is joined by Robbie Bulloch, the director for overseas territories and polar. Thank you both for making the time and taking the trouble to come here today.

We have a series of questions built on themes of the relationship between the British Government and overseas territories. We met some members of the overseas territories informally; we took advantage of a meeting that you had before Christmas to do that, and it was helpful and useful. The joint declaration is the real theme of our inquiry. To understand how it works in practice, we need to understand a little more about the kinds of mechanisms you possess in engaging with the overseas territories, what matters are discussed with the overseas territories, and whether those are formal or informal mechanisms. I do not mind if you both feel that you want to play a part in this, or want to take things one at a time; do how you wish. Please start with an overall view of how this works in practice.

Stephen Doughty: Sure. Lord Strathclyde and committee members, this is my first appearance before this committee and it is a genuine pleasure to be here and to be joined by Robbie. First, I want to thank the team in the overseas territories and polar department in the FCDO for the excellent work it does supporting us in a range of unique and complex relationships and systems. It is a complex world, in which you are responsible for many different things, quite different from some traditional responsibilities within the FCDO. It is important to recognise that. I am lucky to be supported by a skilled and experienced team, which is dedicated to supporting our wider UK family.

It is a privilege for me to be the Minister for Overseas Territories. My connection with them goes back many years, in opposition and government. I have had the pleasure of visiting many of them, and of engaging with many Governments, elected representatives, governors and teams. In opposition, I set out quite a clear approach to the relationship with the overseas territories, and carried that into government. It was based on openness and mutual respect, recognising that, while we have different responsibilities, we have a key role to play in ensuring the success, security and well-being of the people of the overseas territories, and our relationship. I want to be clear from the beginning that our commitment to their sovereignty, security and self-determination is absolutely robust.

One of my first actions as Minister was to set out the principles which we agreed at the joint ministerial council in 2024. They underpin our day-to-day work. Those principles align with the joint declaration, which was made under a previous Government, but I do not think you just junk things because they were there under a previous Government. Many

aspects of the relationship were working well. However, there were things that we wanted to change. There had been a lot of ministerial change and about seven different Ministers dealing with the OTs. There had been a bit of a revolving door. For such crucial a relationship, it is important to have some consistency of approach and practice.

We had a successful joint ministerial council just before Christmas and now look ahead to developing further mechanisms to underpin our relationship beyond those principles, the joint declaration and the existing individual communiqués and agreements. We are developing a charter of engagement, looking at the UK Government's responsibilities, and making sure that those are very clear. A number of statements have been made in other parts of government—for example, about the fact that the overseas territories are part of the homeland and that that implies a number of responsibilities on behalf of the whole of His Majesty's Government. We are also offering partnership compacts setting out how we will work with individual territories.

It is worth emphasising that although, in a particular way, there is a commonality of relationships with the overseas territories, they are all unique and distinct. They have different constitutions, governance mechanisms, needs and requirements. Some receive official development assistance and some do not. There are many different sizes of population, geographies and needs. We need to recognise that there is no "one size fits all". While we have some clear principles that we apply to all of them, there is also a nuanced approach. I have put a huge amount of effort into personal engagement with the leaders, as have other Ministers across government. One of my key aims has been to ensure consistency and regularity of engagement across HMG, individually with premiers and governors, between Ministers in their Administrations and Ministers here, and with officials on a regular basis. Just last week, I spoke to leaders and governors in the Caribbean overseas territories to discuss developments in the region following the US operations in Venezuela and the implications of wider security issues in the Caribbean.

As I said, the joint ministerial council is the core part of the relationship. I certainly think that if you speak to leaders of the overseas territories they will say something similar. That brings everybody together—the elected leaders, governors and UK Ministers—for some quite honest and open conversations about all aspects of our partnerships. I have chaired the last two councils and we received positive feedback from elected leaders, governors and others who attended. At the JMC in 2024, we agreed nearly 80 practical actions together, covering everything from security and economic growth to climate resilience and good governance. I am pleased to say that we do not make these statements and then just leave them languishing on a piece of paper. We follow up on them with a regular tracker. I have held officials and teams, and indeed other Ministers, to account for making sure that we deliver on our responsibilities, and 94% of the actions from that JMC have already been delivered or are well under way. We have a similar tracker for the agreements that we made at the JMC just now. That means real progress

and tangible results: new patrol vessels and emergency services in the Caribbean, major infrastructure projects, hospitals, ports and work to protect biodiversity. That is ultimately what matters: the tangible results of the relationship and whether it is delivering.

That is why my role is also to make sure that other Ministers across government deliver on their responsibilities, and that other departments that perhaps do not have such a day-to-day experience or engagement with the OTs understand where their responsibilities lie, and how they need to be fulfilled. I chair an OT ministerial group. We also have a directors' board, which Robbie chairs, to keep departments joined up. It is also important to see things for yourself, so I have visited a number of the territories since I became Minister. I have been in Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, the Turks and Caicos Islands, Gibraltar, Cayman and Bermuda, and have had regular engagements with a number of them. That has been hugely important in understanding some of the granular details on the ground, particularly when it comes to some of the security issues they have been facing, and challenges around climate, environment and infrastructure. That has helped to inform the way we approach those issues with other Ministers. It is also important to send strong signals about the nature of the relationship to both the OTs themselves and the outside world. I always make sure that I also engage with community representatives, civil society organisations, Government and Opposition, and local media, so that we get a fuller picture of all the different relationships as they exist.

There has been a lot of progress and I will give a couple of examples. We have a trading relationship with the overseas territories that is now worth more than £17 billion. That puts them among the UK's top 25 partners. We got nearly £13 million in infrastructure projects finished over the past year, and there are another £60 million-worth in the pipeline. We have the unique Blue Belt Programme, which protects 4 million square kilometres of ocean. We launched a new OT biodiversity strategy just before Christmas. But I will be honest, Lord Strathclyde and colleagues: there are also some challenges. In relation to the principles that I set out, we are clear about our duties and responsibilities, and we need to meet those. The challenge for me, with other Ministers, is to make sure we do that. We also expect that the responsibilities of good governance and transparency will be upheld by the OTs as part of the UK family. That can obviously involve reforms to constitutions. I was pleased to sign some constitutional reforms with Turks and Caicos, developing their constitution further. We have supported a number of territories with judicial and governance reforms. We have also had to deal with some substantial challenges. We picked up the outcomes from the British Virgin Islands Commission of Inquiry. I am pleased to say that substantial progress has been made there. We worked closely on those issues with the Government of the British Virgin Islands. There are substantial challenges around security, on which we are working closely with colleagues in the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence and others. We have also focused on issues around transparency in financial services. Members will be aware of statements I have made on publicly accessible

registers of beneficial ownership, the importance of sanctions implementation, and a load of other relevant matters.

We have been clear to recognise where progress has been made but also to challenge where it has been too slow. We have candid and honest conversations about that, but we do not make it just, "This hasn't happened". We step in and offer technical support, advice and guidance. We have excellent work going on, for example, on sanctions. That is just a flavour of the type of relationships we have, and I am sure you will have lots of questions.

The Chair: It all sounds very comprehensive, and I am pleased to hear that the JMC in 2024 resulted in a lot of issues on which you have been able to follow up—and, indeed, with the most recent one at the end of 2025. Certainly, when we met them, I got a strong impression of how different everyone's needs and requirements were. You managed to factor that in through the JMC as a forum for co-operation. I want to take up some of the questions on transparency, and so on. That is not directly involved in the joint declaration, but I know that Lady Hamwee wishes to pose one or two questions.

Q15 **Baroness Hamwee:** I am sorry not to be with you in the room. I want to ask about human rights and the Government's attitude to balancing our ambition for human rights with, I suppose, quite varied attitudes among the overseas territories, respect for their own cultures and so on. Would you say a word about that?

Stephen Doughty: I think we are equally committed to our international commitments on human rights. Of course, in the UK, as the constitutionally responsible power for international obligations that we have signed up to—including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, different conventions of the United Nations and the ECHR—we take those responsibilities very seriously. We obviously expect that overseas territories will also uphold them. We have engaged in regular dialogues on a series of issues, everything from child rights to disability rights, LGBT rights and other issues. A positive recent example was work that I signed jointly with the Attorney-General in Bermuda relating to safeguarding of children and work to improve their systems, which was done in close collaboration with us and others. We uphold those, but I also take the chance to hear directly from civil society organisations and citizens in overseas territories as to how they feel about things. That can apply to everything from judicial processes to prison conditions or other matters. We take those things very seriously. Our approach is always to come alongside the OTs and support them to uphold those obligations, and if necessary make what might be an infrastructure or legal change.

Baroness Hamwee: Yes, alongside rather than leading by the hand. I was going to ask for an example of success—but you have just done that, on safeguarding—and an example of something that troubles you that you are trying to move forward.

Stephen Doughty: I think that we and a number of OTs would accept—I am sure Robbie will agree with this—that we want strong compliance on things like prison conditions and facilities. Some facilities have been quite outdated, perhaps with challenges around them. We have had excellent support from the Ministry of Justice in addressing those issues. I visited one prison in Anguilla and saw the work they were doing. That is an area where there is still a lot of work to be done, but I am confident that we have a constructive relationship. We both recognise what needs to be done, and we have the right technical support there, helping to improve those conditions.

Q16 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** Good morning, Minister. I too am sorry I cannot be with you personally and look forward to seeing you in the near future. What Baroness Hamwee raised is included in the joint declaration. It says: “As members of the British family, we will all practise the highest standards of governance, including in the areas of human rights, rule of law, integrity in public life and financial management”. I want to ask you about the regulation of beneficial ownership. When I looked last at BVI, Bermuda, Anguilla, and Turks and Caicos, none of them had agreed. Has any of them agreed now?

Stephen Doughty: That is a very good question, Lord Foulkes, on an issue that we have regularly discussed candidly with our friends in the overseas territories. It is important to recognise where progress has been made. Gibraltar already has a fully publicly accessible register of beneficial ownership. St Helena introduced one. Cayman has made some substantial progress. We have clear commitments from the others. Have they moved as fast as I would have liked? No. We have been robust in challenging them and had discussions with a number of specific territories about what we expect to see. We offered support to enable those things to be put in place. Our ultimate expectation remains fully accessible registers of beneficial ownership. As an interim step, it is most important to have the legitimate interest access registers. In a number of OTs, legislation has now been passed or is being drafted to enable that to happen, but we also expect them to be of a high accessibility standard so that practical impediments will not be put in place that make the legislation difficult to apply in practice.

The point that I have regularly made to all OTs is that this helps them not only to ensure that their financial industries are fully transparent and successful—I have seen many good examples of the work their industries do—but to comply with sanctions legislation. If we know what is going on, we can pick up where there are challenges. Again, I pay tribute to some of the OTs for the work they have done in that area—particularly Cayman, with Operation Hektor and the work on sanctions. Is there more to be done? Absolutely. Are we clear that that is our expectation? Absolutely. This was a key part of our discussions at the joint ministerial council.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You say you are being robust. The commission of inquiry set up by the governor of the BVI recommended direct rule. That was then lowered to the Order in Council, through which

you were going to take some action. You have now replaced the Order in Council; you have withdrawn it, and there is monitoring. That is not really robust. We know there is sanctions busting in the BVI, with Abramovich, the TUI company, Mordashov, and the property that Russian sanctions busters own in the United Kingdom but is registered in the BVI. The action that you are taking does not really look very robust. Surely you should take stronger action against the BVI.

Stephen Doughty: We have a candid and direct conversation with BVI. I have met with the premier on a number of occasions and, indeed, with the governor and others. I should explain to the committee that, of course, the commission of inquiry started under the previous Government and continued, and there was a full report on the recommendations and whether those had been implemented. We looked closely at the evidence in terms of what legislative and governance changes had been made. We undertook a number of reviews, including by the governor and others, and the conclusion was that an interim Administration would not be required and we should therefore revoke the draft Order in Council. However—and you can refer back to the different statements I gave at the time—we are absolutely clear that if there is not implementation and practical progress with the different legislative and governance changes in BVI, we will judge things by their outcomes for the people of BVI and our wider responsibilities. I assure you that we have some robust mechanisms in place to monitor that. I have been very clear that we have duties and responsibilities, and if they are not fulfilled we always reserve the right to take further action.

We have some serious concerns, about which I have been very clear with the premier, about the findings in the HMICFRS report into policing in BVI. One issue on which we are strongly encouraging the Government there is investment in policing, and various other reforms that the governor is taking forward. You can be assured that this issue is regularly across my desk. We are not afraid to have a robust and strong conversation, including in public. As I said, it is really important to recognise that we work in partnership. This is not about “doing to” overseas territories. They have elected Governments. They have their own accountability mechanisms. It is important to allow those to go forward in a proper way; but of course, if serious issues are not addressed, we reserve the right to take the actions we need to. We have not shied away from that in the past, nor would we in the future.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: It reflects badly on the United Kingdom because people around the world know that we are ultimately responsible for these overseas territories. We need to take robust action. I will accept your assurance, and we will keep an eye on it.

Stephen Doughty: Indeed, and I have regularly been scrutinised in the other place, with colleagues raising very specific cases. I shy away from getting into individual cases today, for obvious reasons, but I pointed out to the premier and others the level of interest and expectation, not just from within this place but in the OTs themselves and of course from

journalists, the media, NGOs and others—and rightly so. We should be held to high standards of accountability and good governance.

Q17 Lord Waldegrave of North Hill: I also apologise for not being physically present. Minister, I wanted to start, really, with a word of congratulation to you and your officials, because it seemed to me, observing from outside, that the achievement of the deal over the Gibraltar border was a good example of how things should be done, with the close involvement of a very able Chief Minister, and the rest of it. It was a good outcome. I want to press a little more in a slightly different direction from Lord Foulkes. We talk about the family, but the family has to have the same values everywhere. There may be cultural pushback with, for example, same-sex marriage, but ultimately British citizens have to follow the same human rights laws and conventions, wherever they happen to be, in the United Kingdom or an overseas territory, do they not? On an issue like that, would you proceed in involving local people? How do you take those things forward, where there might be quite strong cultural pushback in one or two territories?

Stephen Doughty: I have clear views on this personally, and of course the Government do, too, on wider human rights and equalities issues. Obviously, we have our own requirements under different conventions that we have signed, as I mentioned earlier to Lady Hamwee. I would point to some really positive progress including, recently, in Montserrat. I had a positive conversation with the premier there about the recognition of same-sex partnerships. We are working closely with the territories where that is not yet the case. There have also been a number of judicial and other proceedings in relation to this, court cases that have complicated matters in each location, some of which have gone to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. This is an issue on which we work closely with them. Obviously, we can offer support in terms of drafting legislation or processes of consultation, but I express my views clearly. It is important to recognise that, just as within the UK things have moved at different speeds at different times based on our constitutional settlement in devolution, we want to work alongside the OTs to achieve this, rather than stepping in and “doing to”. I have made clear my views on what I hope to see in each of the OTs.

Lord Waldegrave of North Hill: I quite understand the language of not wanting to “do to” and all that, but we have to get to the objective in the end, do we not?

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree. I have discussed this candidly with a number of the OT premiers. I was privileged to serve on the committee considering equal marriage here. That is not even what is being suggested here. Some OTs were looking at introducing recognition of same-sex civil partnerships, essentially; but we have been through a complex debate here in the UK. We have often shared our experience from that and how you can move things forward.

Lord Waldegrave of North Hill: Well done on Gibraltar.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you.

Q18 **Lord Griffiths of Burry Port:** I echo what was said about Gibraltar, but does not Gibraltar in a sense offer a model that we should think of imitating across the territories, of painstaking negotiations taking whatever time it takes, alongside and with, so that there is ownership and so on? The declaration and agreements we look at are an attempt to pretend that there is a kind of overall picture that we can easily subscribe to, and all fit in with. In those overall things, I quite see that there are things like the observation of human rights and the standards that our constitutional arrangements here create, as models; but in the reportage that we get we see divergence, or a different pace of application, and sometimes rejection of suggestions. It all seems a hotchpotch to me. I am coming at this for the first time. Perhaps it is clearer in your minds than in mine. You, Minister, have done big international humanitarian jobs. I was on the board of Christian Aid for a while and I know there is no substitute for working with partners in the places where things have to be applied. Sometimes the local circumstances of some of the places suggest that that is more difficult than in others.

I am coming to the end of my question; mine tend to be long. My personal interest is Turks and Caicos because I lived in Haiti for 10 years. I think that 70% or 80% of the people of Turks and Caicos are from Haiti. If we think we have a small boat problem here, across the English Channel, let me tell you they really have one between the north coast of Haiti and Turks and Caicos. They are in a total mess, it seems to me, in managing that, and the exploitation of Haitian immigrants. I worked with the Haitian ambassador here and she tells me directly that it is a really difficult situation. The United States is about to send half a million Haitians back to Haiti under its deportation plans, and so on. Some of those will get to Turks and Caicos. It is a hotchpotch, is it not?

Stephen Doughty: I would not describe it as a hotchpotch but nuanced and different. That is important to recognise. It goes back to what I said at the beginning, Lord Griffiths, that you cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to the overseas territories. Going back to the previous question about financial services, some overseas territories are not really engaged in financial services. There is some sort of myth out there that they all are, or that they are all involved in the same thing; they are not. Bermuda plays a crucial role in the global insurance industry. Cayman plays a role in funds. Some are involved in companies. Gibraltar has an important role in motor insurance, including in the UK. It is important to understand that nuance.

You asked two specific questions. One was about the approach to negotiations—and thank you, and Lord Waldegrave, for your comments about Gibraltar. A lot of that thanks is due to Robbie, sitting next to me, who has rightly been honoured by His Majesty the King in the new year's honours for his work on it. It represents a successful example of an approach where we were clear from the start about our principles and what we wanted to achieve. As well as protecting the UK's clear interests in relation to our military base and sovereignty, we were not going to do

anything that the Government of Gibraltar were not content with on behalf of the people they had been elected by. It is a good example of how we approach negotiations on behalf of and with other overseas territories. They get involved with a lot of discussions, on everything from maritime border disputes to agreements with third countries. At the moment, a number of OTs wish to join Caricom, so we are working with them on how they can accede while maintaining our equities in that process as well, where we retain the constitutional responsibility for foreign affairs and defence. We again want to do that in a way that is co-operative and engaged. We have tried to make sure that the OTs are well represented in the COP process and have had an increased representation there, in particular because of the impact of climate change on them. We also had to engage on a number of occasions in relation to issues post Brexit or global tariffs, which we have done successfully on behalf of the Falkland Islands and Tristan da Cunha in the past year, so it provides an approach. Where they are an elected Government and have elected representatives, they have democratic legitimacy. It is important we recognise and respect that, in the way we do on the devolution settlement here in the United Kingdom. Equally, we have responsibilities and have to protect the UK's interests, but let us do that together in a spirit of partnership and respect.

The second part of your question was about Haiti. I am very glad you raised this because when I visited Turks and Caicos I saw the very direct implications of what was happening a hundred miles away from TCI, with Haitians coming on small boats and the very serious issues around crime and violence. I visited some of the informal settlements on Turks and Caicos and met with the police. Unfortunately, I saw some very direct examples of what has happened there. That is why we are working incredibly closely on those issues with the Turks and Caicos premier and governor, with colleagues in the Home Office and MoD. We have an important security summit coming up shortly in the Caribbean. We work closely with the United States and others on these matters. Recently, I visited US agencies and officials in Miami between my visits to Cayman and Bermuda on these issues. We provided a lot of direct support, or in some cases enabled the Turks and Caicos Islands Government to get regional and practical support, whether from Jamaica, the Bahamas or others—we have to be involved as the foreign affairs lead constitutionally—to enable them to respond on the ground. Is there still a major challenge? Absolutely. Are there further challenges in the Caribbean? Absolutely. That was very much why I had a conversation directly with all the premiers and governors last week, because this is an ongoing conversation.

Q19 The Chair: Throughout your answers, there is the thought: what is the trigger to decide whether you get involved and engaged with the OTs themselves? Is there a general view? Is it as and when?

Stephen Doughty: We have some very practical day-to-day systems in place. I will bring in Robbie in a moment to talk about some of those at the official level. For example, I receive a fulsome weekly update on what

is happening in every single overseas territory. If I have any questions, I can raise those. I engage proactively with the premiers and governors, often directly. For example, recently in advance of Hurricane Melissa, where there was a real chance of impact on Cayman and Turks and Caicos, we proactively engaged. I liaised in advance with other Ministers to make sure we got the support in place. Thankfully, there was not a huge direct impact on either of those and, as a result, they were able to offer support to Jamaica. I thought that was a very powerful example of the OT family working to support each other and their neighbours, particularly given the support Jamaica has provided to us on so many occasions, for which we are hugely grateful. It is a fellow Commonwealth partner. I am engaged in OT issues pretty much every week. I will bring in Robbie to say a little about official-level co-ordination between departments.

Robbie Bulloch: In the way we are constituted, we have governors in each of the territories, so in a sense we are directly engaged in day-to-day running and in many cases our governors chair cabinets as well. More to the point, they are engaged in practical solutions dealing with day-to-day issues in TCI around migration. I have a small but very good team in London that works to provide support. We have desk officers for each of the territories as well on a day-to-day basis. In addition, we have a range of programmes under ODA, but also non-ODA, which support the territories on a number of issues, particularly security but also climate and civil resilience, preparing for the hurricane season and all of that stuff. The function of my directorate in the Foreign Office is exactly that: to be the day-to-day interface with governors and work with them to support the territories. As the Minister said, we give regular updates and often, more than once a week, we will put up a specific bit of intelligence about something that is happening and ask the Minister to engage, and he always does. It is a constant process.

Stephen Doughty: The OTs themselves reflected this at the joint ministerial council. Even though we also had some robust and challenging conversations, Premier Wheatley said it was the best he had ever attended, as did many other leaders. There is a general sense that the relationship has matured; it is one of respect. There is genuine effort on the part of not just our department but other Ministers, too. I think seven other Ministers attended from across government. Hugely valuable conversations went on covering everything from judicial processes to biodiversity and sport. We were even talking about the upcoming Commonwealth Games and how OTs are involved in that.

The Chair: For instance, what circumstances would trigger direct rule? Is there an answer to that?

Stephen Doughty: There is not a hard-and-fast answer, but we have clear constitutional responsibilities and processes that we can undertake, if necessary. It has happened very rarely. I think the last time—correct me if I am wrong—was the Turks and Caicos in the late 2000s, when I was a government adviser. That is not the situation in which any of us

would wish to find ourselves. It is extraordinarily expensive and complex, in the same way that it would be to take over a council here in the UK, or with measures in relation to a devolved Administration. We would always try to avoid that situation, but if it were necessary for the protection of the overseas territory and its people, or indeed the UK's interest, we retain that right in reserve.

The Chair: I call on Lord Murphy, who may want to change direction slightly.

Q20 Lord Murphy of Torfaen: A very good morning to you, Minister. I want to talk briefly about cross-departmental engagement. You touched on a couple of things that quite interested me. First, you mentioned recently in your remarks the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office. You also touched on devolution in the United Kingdom. You and I would remember that, when it started, relations between the devolved Administrations and Whitehall were essentially between the Wales Office or Scotland Office. That has changed over the years. There is direct contact between the devolved Administrations and individual government departments. How does that work so far as the overseas territories are concerned? Would you act as the conduit, or would they go directly to an individual department when necessary?

As an aside, only this morning I read that a number of overseas territories have agreements with local authorities in the United Kingdom on things like the fire service, for example. Bearing in mind that the populations of some of these territories are much smaller than those of very large local authorities, it seems to be something we ought to encourage.

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree on the last point and it is something we do encourage, and there are many excellent partnerships with different parts of the UK, different councils and indeed devolved Administrations. Essentially, there are two ways in which we formally do this. I will bring in Robbie to talk about official-level co-ordination. We have an overseas territories ministerial group, which I chair. In between those meetings, there are official-level conversations in a similar vein. We also have a separate overseas territories ministerial security board, given the very specific issues around defence and security that some of them have faced. That is a group in which I and MoD, MoJ and Home Office colleagues have been very closely involved, responding to some of the challenges in Turks and Caicos, and the Caribbean in particular. We have the directors' board and a specific group, in which your colleagues might be interested, related to the polar regions. That obviously goes beyond just the OT aspect of the polar regions, but it is particularly important in relation to the Antarctic, given South Georgia, South Sandwich Islands, British Antarctic Territory, the Falklands and others, and particular challenges, as well as geopolitics, science and co-operation in that regard. There are many different ways in which we do this, but a lot of the hard work gets done on a day-to-day basis between me and other Ministers just having conversations and getting things done. I want to

thank my colleagues, particularly in the MoD, Home Office and MoJ, for all the work they have done to help deliver some important changes.

As for direct contact, we actively encourage this. They know that they can always come through us as the primary point of contact, but where there are very practical reasons for liaising directly with the Department of Health and Social Care, or otherwise, we actively encourage that and it happens. I refer, for example, to the work done to get Covid vaccines out to the overseas territories during the pandemic. Work on the Mpox vaccine is another recent example. There is some excellent collaboration with Defra. I praise particularly Minister Creagh in Defra, who has done a great job working on the biodiversity strategy with the OTs. We actively encourage it; we do not seek to get in the way of that, but we make sure it is all joined up. Robbie, do you want to add something on the official-level side?

Robbie Bulloch: I echo that. We are not dealing with a foreign Government here; this is part of the UK family, so there should be direct contact, which we encourage. We need to know what is going on because, as the Minister said, we need to co-ordinate. We also fund a lot of the activity. That is one co-ordinating role that the Foreign Office performs. We have certain programmes around borders, security, justice, climate, which I mentioned, and Blue Belt, which the Minister mentioned, so in that sense we can help facilitate. Most departments are really good. They have very small teams that focus on the OTs and some of the work they do is outstanding; it is very good. There is also learning in both directions. Some things that happen in the territories help develop expertise and ideas that we can bring back to the UK.

Stephen Doughty: On a practical level, if you are responding to a very particular situation, often it is much more sensible to have that other department or its agencies engaging directly. To give an example, there was an issue covered quite heavily in the media regarding the explosion in January 2025 of a SpaceX rocket over Turks and Caicos and other territories in the Caribbean. Some excellent work was done, with not just us but the UK Space Agency, the Department for Transport and its agencies, looking at the clear-up of any debris and so on to make sure that was dealt with. We have some unique capabilities. Similarly, it happens on maritime safety. For example, the MCA provides some important support directly, and through the MoD some excellent support goes into the overseas territories regiments which have been established in a number of locations. It is important that that work is able to happen and move on without us interfering on a day-to-day basis.

Lord Murphy of Torfaen: One additional point is about the Crown dependencies of Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man. Is there any contact between the overseas territories and them?

Stephen Doughty: There is, but obviously constitutionally the arrangements are different. The primary relationship with them is through the Ministry of Justice and particularly the Home Office. When it comes to some of those broader themes—for example, financial

transparency and registered beneficial ownership—there is an important conversation there on sanctions and other matters. Another interesting one is relations with the EU and the implications of different aspects of Brexit—there has been some commonality there—and in relation to maritime protection, biodiversity and so on, again, there are common interests. We do have some events where both are present. I have certainly engaged with all three Crown dependency Governments.

Q21 Lord Burnett of Maldon: Can I just explore this a little further so I understand exactly how these relationships work? Minister, you mentioned an overseas territory ministerial group, which I understand is a group of UK Ministers. In a moment I will ask my other question, but I would be interested to know who is on it—in other words, the range of Ministers. In the context of engagement with other government departments, one can well understand that there is a huge amount of expertise in UK government departments that it would be very useful for overseas territories to be able to rely on rather than try to reinvent the wheel themselves. How does it work? Is this informal? In other words, will departments happily give advice to overseas territories and regard it as part of their function to do so? How does that work? Mr Bulloch, you mentioned that your department funds quite a lot of the engagement, so that raises a thought about there being a programme of some sort that requires somebody to pay for it, and the other departments might be a bit reluctant. I am interested to know how free and easy all of this is and whether, putting it in colloquial terms, a minister or premier in the Turks and Caicos can get in touch with the Department of Health, the Department for Transport and so forth if they have a problem. There is just a little bit more to understand how it and the ministerial group work in practice.

Stephen Doughty: As for the ministerial group, my understanding is that there is an invitation to all departments with the possible exception of DWP, although we have had engagement with the DWP on specific topics in relation to the pensions of people going to and from the overseas territories.

Lord Burnett of Maldon: Who actually turns up?

Stephen Doughty: We have had pretty good attendance. I do not have all the minutes in front of me, but, to give you an example, I have a list of those who attended the joint ministerial council. The people who attend the ministerial group tend to be those who attend the JMC as well. At the JMC we had both me and Minister Elmore from the FCDO, who covers the Caribbean because of the links there; we had Lord Coaker from the MoD; we had Katie White from DESNZ; we had Mary Creagh from Defra; we had Lord Hanson from the Home Office; we had Lucy Rigby from the Treasury; we had Jake Richards from the MoJ; plus, we had a number of other envoys, agency heads and so on. So there is genuinely positive and quite comprehensive engagement. If Ministers are not able to attend, they send senior officials, which is very much appreciated. Certainly, I have had a lot of day-to-day contact with all of them. It is a two-way process. Sometimes there are things on which we

offer active support where there is a clear UK nexus. I mentioned the financial transparency issues, but we played quite an active role, for example, in supporting the sanctions teams. We have a kind of special sanctions conference where people come together. We share a lot of technical expertise on that, as well as specific teams with them. There is a group of police commissioners from the overseas territories that meets both us and Home Office colleagues.

We have also been doing some important things in the opposite direction in responding to requests from overseas territories. For example, there have been requests for better access to training resources from the Department of Health and Social Care, the College of Policing and Sandhurst. We are troubleshooting some of those things at the moment and I am pleased to say having some real success in that regard, whether it is fees, access or otherwise. They are part of our collective family. If we have resource and expertise to share, we want to be able to do that at a family price and by way of a family approach, rather than treating them as though they are some sort of outside third party, which unfortunately has happened to an extent in the past, not by design but by accident.

The crucial thing I have tried to do—certainly I have had a lot of help from other Ministers in doing it—is to have a dedicated Minister responsible for OT issues in each department, although it is on the responsibility list. One reason we are doing this charter and other things is to make sure it is understood and writ large across government that they have responsibilities. This is the homeland; it is not some sort of third party out there. Therefore, that comes with certain constitutional obligations. Quite rightly, premiers and governors often challenge, through me, other parts of Whitehall where they think that has not been done. I would point particularly to the support provided by the MOJ, which is very proactive at both official and ministerial level and works very well.

Robbie Bulloch: To pick up the point that you made, yes, there are formal programmes and we fund specific activity, but then there is the day-to-day thing that comes, as the Minister said, with ministerial responsibility. Each department has a responsibility to respond. Sometimes there are already informal channels. If there are not, someone in my team who covers that desk will link up those people. There are practical things as well such as access to Civil Service Learning that is already there, as the Minister said. We are making sure that these things are joined up. There are also specific requests sometimes. We fund a network of chief medical officers from each of the territories. They are all very different, but they have learned things about working in remote environments. We bring together all the Attorneys-General, often once a year, just to compare notes because they are working in similar jurisdictions under the common law. There are very practical things that we do, but there are always informal channels as well.

Q22 **Lord Bellamy:** Good morning to you both. The inquiry by this committee

is into the joint declaration of 2023, so we are particularly interested in establishing the current status, usefulness and practical relevance of that declaration. Have the UK Government delivered against the commitments in that declaration such as to publish a new strategy for the overseas territories? Reading between the lines, Minister, one got the impression that perhaps the joint declaration is being overtaken a little bit by your work in the joint ministerial councils, which seems to be very positive. Perhaps you could fill us in on what view you take now of the joint declaration.

Stephen Doughty: The joint declaration remains in place. The previous White Paper from 2012 remains in place. We do not seek to junk things that are there and that have given some stability and certainty to the relationship if they are helpful and still valid. Some of them have been overtaken by other events. There were also some gaps. One issue raised regularly with me by OT leaders is the lack of focus perhaps on some of the climate and nature issues under previous agreements. We are seeking to address that through different means. All but two of the commitments in the declaration have been met, or there are open-ended, continuous ongoing actions. For your information, the only two we have not done are, first, that we have not published a strategy. I inherited the start of a strategy under the previous Administration. There was a strong feeling that that had been rushed and perhaps not consulted on as fully as it should have been, to be candid about the reflections that I had on coming into office. Instead, we are taking the approach of the compact, the charter that I mentioned, the work of the joint ministerial councils and otherwise. We understand there is a strong desire on behalf of a number of OTs for a new White Paper. That will not be possible at the current time, but we remain open-minded as to the future. I am most interested—and the OT leaders know this—in what works, what delivers for them and what delivers for certainty and stability in the relationship.

Lord Bellamy: Forgive me for interrupting. So at present there is no intention to publish a strategy.

Stephen Doughty: No, but at the JMC we had a lengthy discussion about this, and I welcome the fact that the OTs themselves are looking to put together some proposals for how they would like to see the overall relationship evolve and develop, and where they think there are areas where additional work needs to be done. That is a piece of work that they have committed to do. We will look at that with great interest and attempt to respond in kind. In parallel, that then runs alongside the offer to any OT that wants to establish a compact with us that we will be open to doing that. Some of them want to see some further constitutional reforms and changes. Again, we await their proposals on those, and we look at those with an open mind and are always willing to consider them, as well as very specific requests such as accession to Caricom or otherwise. Sometimes these are quite complex processes because a lot of work needs to be done to make sure that we are not creating any challenges for our equities or problems that might emerge in the future.

We always try to approach it with a very open mind, and I have certainly done so with each OT.

There was one other action, which was No. 12: we are not aware of any plans for compacts between OTs. If they want to establish them, that is not something we are opposed to. Practically, there has been some absolutely excellent mutual support between OTs themselves, particularly on disaster management, climate and other issues. There has been a lot of progress since the joint declaration. There is certainly no attempt to undermine things that were already agreed. I would look at both the joint declaration and the previous White Paper through the lens of the principles that we set out, and particularly the two communiqués that we have had from the two joint ministerial councils under this Government as well as some of the individual agreements we have reached.

The Chair: You say the White Paper is not going to be possible. Is that because it is not necessary or because there is a lack of capacity within the department?

Stephen Doughty: These things take up a huge amount of resource and time. We have tried to focus instead on the practical things that will make a difference right now. You will hear this from OTs directly. They take a strong view that they would like to see one, so this remains an ongoing conversation.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You mentioned that some are looking at constitutional changes. Are any of them considering independence? The population of Bermuda is about the same as Dominica, which is an independent country of the Caribbean.

Stephen Doughty: Lord Foulkes, you would have to ask them. As you would expect in any democracy, there is a range of views on the constitutional relationship with the UK. At the current time, they remain valued and hugely respected parts of our global family, with different levels, effectively, of constitutional relationship. We are completely open-minded to colleagues in the family raising that they want changes to constitutions and developments, and we respect what their Governments and citizens decide.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: So if a party seeking independence won control in any of the overseas territories and sought independence, we would agree to it.

Stephen Doughty: I do not comment on hypothetical scenarios for obvious reasons. There is a range of views on these issues. Nobody is currently seeking independence that I am aware of.

The Chair: That is very clear. Lady Andrews.

Q23 **Baroness Andrews:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, gentlemen. I apologise as well for not being with you. I wanted to follow up on what the Minister just said about an initiative. The phrase that was used at the end of the 2024 JMC was that there was an ambition to transform the

relationship between the UK and the overseas territories. You have given us such an extraordinary wealth of examples of what is actually happening on a day-to-day strategic basis as well. It is very encouraging. You suggest that this notion of transformation is something that the members of the family have now taken away to come back with. I cannot quite remember the phrase that you used, but am I correct that we have said, "If you can find better ways of transforming this relationship other than what we're doing and have been doing for the last year, come and tell us"?

Stephen Doughty: Yes, that is very much the case. That also applies on individual issues. I am incredibly open-minded. I do not come at this with some sort of ideology or otherwise. We want a constructive and open relationship, and one of mutual respect. These are fellow family members, and we ought to speak to and treat each other in that way. Where there are difficulties, disagreements and things that we cannot do, it is also incumbent on me to be honest with them about that. You have to ask them how they feel about the relationship, but it is definitely the strongest that it has been in a number of years, and I am really glad to report that. That is certainly the feedback that we had at the joint ministerial council. People feel respected and listened to. We do not always agree, but that is like any family. It is what we are attempting to achieve here.

Ultimately, there is a change, a transformation, certainly that I have tried to pursue and I know that other Ministers share as well. The overseas territories are hugely important parts of our wider family's offer to the world. They offer fantastic examples of innovation, different services, unique landscapes and unique people. We are in nine time zones. We have unique strategic capabilities as a result of some of the overseas territories, which meet the security and defence needs of the United Kingdom and our allies. We have incredible sporting prowess. One really exciting session that we had at the joint ministerial council was about overseas territories' representatives in Team GB winning medals for our collective family, and I do not think that has been recognised enough in the past. Sometimes we focus on the problems, and they might be about security, some governance issues or some transparency issues in some places, but, actually, there is a huge amount that the OTs offer to the world. I also think of places like the Falklands that are unique in terms of access to the Antarctic and our protection of those incredible environments in the south Atlantic, as well as innovating in all sorts of different ways. Meeting the insurance industry in Bermuda was really fascinating, with the work it is doing on climate risk reinsurance globally and war risk reinsurance. We had an important discussion about Ukraine and insurance in relation to it. It is not this idea that these are far-flung places that we just have to do some stuff to. It is absolutely the opposite. They are valued members of the family. They have a huge amount to contribute to the world.

Baroness Andrews: The Minister just described brilliantly the incredible diversity of the family. When we had the privilege of meeting them

informally, they seemed to wonder whether the JMC could meet more frequently and might be more explicitly structured in terms of agenda and session setting and so on. I wonder whether anything like that is possibly going to come back from their own deliberations or whether you also, including your officials, would want to suggest that there are even more ways of adding value through the JMC.

Stephen Doughty: The agenda is drawn up jointly with them and agreed with them. We are always happy to consider changes and new sessions, and, in fact, we did this year respond very clearly to a number of things that they wanted to see discussed. It is a team effort. We try to make sure that we get through all the things that we need to. In terms of more regular JMC meetings, I do not think there is any plan to have an additional JMC during the year, but I have ensured that there have been regular catch-ups, either as a full group of all the elected leaders or governors, or both, or smaller groupings as required. The example of the Caribbean security issues was just one. Last week, between the two JMCs, we had a session that Robbie and I joined from Madrid. We were on a visit in Spain talking about the Gibraltar negotiations. We had a call with all the OT leaders about other topics. I am absolutely happy to consider other ways of engaging.

Baroness Andrews: Thank you very much.

Robbie Bulloch: One thing that I wanted to add, partly from this question but also an earlier question, was on the important role of the overseas territories' representatives based in the UK in London. That is an ongoing discussion. I am sure you may interview some of them as part of this inquiry. They play an important role.

Stephen Doughty: They are often a first port of call. Regularly—pretty much every other week—I see one of the OT representatives in London at an event or something else. They are very free to come up and raise issues on behalf of their Governments, and they do very well.

The Chair: We are down to the last couple of questions. Lady Hamwee, you have your hand up.

Q24 **Baroness Hamwee:** Thank you. This is rather more current than strategic. I imagine that some OTs must feel particularly vulnerable to what is emanating from the United States and possibly vulnerable to accusations of sanctions busting or drug smuggling. I am not making any accusations, but if I were there I would feel this. You mentioned some discussions with them. There is also the issue of cybersecurity, which no doubt is on the agenda. Can you give us a flavour of how you are dealing with the current issues? Much of what you have said is more long term.

Stephen Doughty: On cyber, this is absolutely an increased area of discussion for us. In fact, we had a very specific session at the joint ministerial council on this issue, and we are doing everything we can to support our OTs. It has been part of my visits as well, leveraging in expertise from the National Cyber Security Centre and other bodies—I

will not go into other details for obvious reasons here—to make sure that they have robust systems in place, because they are, of course, subject to the actions of criminals and hostile states in the way that we in the UK are, too. Given the importance particularly of some of the industries that take place on the OTs, or indeed our military facilities or otherwise, it is absolutely crucial that we have the strongest systems in place, and I am confident that we take the steps necessary to protect them.

In terms of relationships in relation to the sanctions and some of the particular issues there—I will come back to the US in a moment—the OTs implement all the UK sanctions. They have frozen collectively greater than \$11 billion-worth of assets. They have adapted their systems since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Despite the very high workloads and challenges of technical implementation, there has been significant progress, and we work with them very closely on this. I really praise the work of some of the individual OTs on this. Bermuda does a lot of aircraft registrations. Aircraft need to be removed from registries. There is work that was done in the Cayman Islands in particular, such as Operation Hektor and others. There has been some really fantastic work on that, and it is important that we also share that and make sure that our international partners, including the United States, are aware of that.

Lastly, in terms of the relationship with the United States, as with all parts of the UK family, the US is our closest defence and security partner and one of our strongest economic partners, and that impacts on the OTs as well, particularly those in the Caribbean that import or export and have a lot of transits to and from the United States. Of course, many US citizens enjoy holidays in the OTs in the Caribbean, so we are acutely aware of those relationships. It is why I met with the leaders last week. It is also why I take a lot of time to engage with not only the United States but other partners in the EU such as France and the Netherlands, which have overseas territories in the Caribbean, too, to make sure that we are joined up and that they understand we take our responsibilities very seriously. There is some excellent co-ordination with the United States on security issues. I was pleased to discuss that with a range of agencies when I was in Miami last year.

Q25 Baroness Laing of Elderslie: Very briefly, Minister, it had been suggested that the overseas territories consider that the joint declaration was effectively dead and not going anywhere, but you have shown such enthusiasm for it, so that is clearly not the case. Would we be right in assuming that? On the issue of the White Paper, is there a disagreement between the UK Government and some overseas territories about whether there is a need for a White Paper?

Stephen Doughty: As I said before, a number of the OTs have made very clear—this is not a secret—that they would like to see a White Paper. There is not going to be one at the moment, but we hope that some of the steps that we are taking on the compact, the charter and the other agreements that we are reaching address some of the very practical issues. I am looking forward to receiving the work that the OTs are going to do on ways they see the relationship evolving. In terms of

the question of the future, I cannot speculate. You know that White Papers have to be agreed across the whole of Government. It is not in my gift to offer one, and I have been candid and open with the OTs about this.

Baroness Laing of Elderslie: Am I right in thinking that your argument is that there is no need for a White Paper because working on the joint declaration and developing multilaterally is making sufficient progress?

Stephen Doughty: On a day-to-day basis, we have done everything we can to try to give some of the surety and certainty that OTs want to see. I point particularly to some of the work that we are trying to do around financial allocations and the securing of resource within the department, including on ODA for the overseas territories that have that, and how they set budgets into the future. That is definitely one area. We have taken very practical steps to address the concerns that are rightly there that perhaps there was not enough focus previously on issues in relation to climate and the environment. As I said before, one size does not fit all. There are some broader principles that we need to keep working on together. We have offered these compacts that we hope will give a long-term plan for each OT that wanted one, giving them that certainty in the relationship. We take the best from the previous White Paper, the best from the joint declaration, my principles and the joint ministerial council communiqués and other documents, and then those collectively provide a very strong foundation. There is a difference of opinion. I am not going to shy away from that. I remain open-eared to the views of the OTs on this, and share those with other government colleagues.

The Chair: Lord Griffiths, did you have anything else you wanted to add?

Q26 **Lord Griffiths of Burry Port:** No, I am drawing some threads from all of this. My mind tends, in as far as I know much about any of the territories, to think of our relationship with each of them in a bilateral way of thinking about things. I was mystified by how you draw the relationships with individual territories together into some kind of composite statement. Indeed, looking at what I have read about each of the territories, I wonder if it is even possible. I suppose "a man's reach should exceed his grasp/Or what's a heaven for"? Yes, that is right. I just wanted to say thank you for a bit of elucidation, and I wish you well. If you have any advice for me in my work on Haiti about the Turks and Caicos situation, I would be very glad to follow through with you.

Stephen Doughty: I am sure, Lord Griffiths, that Mr Elmore will be keen to speak with you. I will raise that with him because he works specifically on Haiti. I am very happy to talk informally about the impact on TCI because it has been significant and we work very closely. Seeing it with my own eyes was one of the most affecting visits that I have had to the overseas territories. It is important that we go and understand, and see the reality of situations at times. The situation in Haiti is deeply shocking and disturbing.

The Chair: That might be a very good place for us to draw this session to

a close. There may be one or two questions when we have had a look at them that we want to follow up on, if we may, either directly or through officials. Thank you very much for taking the time and the trouble to come along today.