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# Foreign Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: Work of the FCDO, HC 385

Tuesday 21 April 2026

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

Questions 525-687

Witness

I: Sir Oliver Robbins, Former Permanent Under-Secretary, FCDO



## Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Oliver Robbins.

**Chair:** This is a hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and we are hearing the testimony of Sir Oliver Robbins, at our request, for him to explain the circumstances of Peter Mandelson's appointment, the security implications of it, his role in what happened next and, in recent days, what has happened in relation to leaks and so on.

I think that it is very important that we hear from you—we heard from the Prime Minister yesterday—and thank you very much for appearing. I know this must be a very difficult time for you personally, and we are very grateful to you for coming in.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Thank you, Chair.

Q525 **Chair:** We are hoping that you are going to feel a bit freer to give fuller answers to us than you did on the last occasion you appeared in front of us, on 3 November, or in your letter of 16 September, when you clearly told us the truth, but you only told us part of the truth. It's a little bit like saying, "I had to run to work today," but not saying that you were chased by a bear. It reminded me of when I was a criminal barrister and the importance of the oath being that you had to tell the truth and the whole truth. We are not going to ask you to swear on the Bible or anything like that, but I think that it is important that we do get the whole truth today.

I don't intend to dwell on previous issues—apart from just to say that now—because what I would like to do is just to move on to where we are now and what the questions are. What I would like to do is to ask you to walk us through what the situation was when you appeared in the Foreign Office as permanent under-secretary. What was the state of play, and in particular what was the status of Peter Mandelson? What needed to happen next and what did you need to do in order to ensure that happened?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Thank you, Chair. I know this sounds formal and maybe even a bit unlikely, but thank you very much for the opportunity today to come and speak to you about these matters. As you say, it has been a difficult time, leavened slightly by it being my birthday yesterday.

**Chair:** Yes, I saw that.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** So thank you for the opportunity to set things out. I won't go on at length, but I think there are three important framing points I need to make.

First, as you say, when I walked into post as permanent under-secretary on 20 January last year, I wasn't walking into a vacuum. I arrived to a situation in which a due diligence report had been undertaken into Mandelson by the Cabinet Office, assessing the reputational risks and his fitness for office. The Prime Minister had then presumably taken advice on



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his fitness for office. The name had been submitted to the King as Ministers' recommendation. The Prime Minister had made an announcement that Mandelson was his nominee, without caveats. The British Government had sought agrément—the formal diplomatic process for a host Government accepting a nominee—from the US Government and that had been obtained before I arrived in post. He had been given access to the building. He had been given access to low-classification IT; and from time to time, for case-specific issues, he was being given access to higher-classification briefing.

So I'm afraid I walked into a situation in which there was already a very, very strong expectation—you will have seen the papers, released already under the Humble Address—coming from No. 10, that he needed to be in post and in America as quickly as humanly possible, the very first formal communication of this to my predecessor from the No. 10 private office being that they wanted all this done at pace and Mandelson in post before inauguration. So that's the situation I faced.

**Q526 Chair:** So there is paperwork about that, and that presumably will be disclosed to Parliament.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** It already has been, Chair. That letter from the No. 10 private office is already in the disclosures made.

There's nothing improper about it, but that is the context I walked into. I'm afraid what that translated into for my team in the Foreign Office, and certainly the handover briefing I was getting as I arrived in post, was what I felt was a generally dismissive attitude to his vetting clearance. The focus was on getting Mandelson out to Washington quickly. Despite this atmosphere, an atmosphere of pressure, the Department completed developed vetting to the normal high standard, because the vetting process is not there to determine fitness for office or reputational risk; it's there to protect national security. The Prime Minister had already made those judgments—

**Chair:** I'm so sorry to cut across you. We will get on to that, but I still want to just take it in stages, if that is all right with you.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Of course—yes.

**Q527 Chair:** What I would like to do is ask you about this. We hear about the circumstances, the announcement, the press release, the King having agreed, the Americans having agreed, the letter to him congratulating him on it and the access, but it was all subject to vetting. The question I want to ask is: what kind of pressure, additional to that, were you put under in relation to the vetting?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Before I answer your question, which I promise I will, I am afraid that I do not think at the point of his appointment and for days thereafter it was actually a given that he would be vetted. Again, if you look at the documents submitted under the Humble Address, there is no stipulation from No. 10 that he should be vetted. The welcome that was sent to him immediately afterwards does not say, "Welcome to the Foreign



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Office, subject to vetting." The announcement put out on 20 December says that he will be out early in the new year; it does not say, "subject to vetting".

Q528 **Chair:** The contract of employment does, though. It says—

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** The contract issued to him after he was vetted says that he must maintain his clearance. So did mine. That is an absolutely standard stipulation. But nothing about his appointment, as far as I have seen it in writing, stipulates it.

There was then a debate between the Cabinet Office and the FCDO about how to make sure that he is sent out to post with the appropriate clearance. That took several days, and a position taken from the Cabinet Office was that there was no need to vet Mandelson—he was a Member of the House of Lords and he was a Privy Counsellor. The risks attending his appointment were well known and had been made clear to the Prime Minister before appointment. In the end, the FCDO insisted and put its foot down—I understand my predecessor had to be very firm in person. But that was a live debate at the point of announcement, and I think it is important to make that clear to the Committee.

Q529 **Chair:** Those discussions should have been minuted and they should be part of the Humble Address disclosure.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Given your absolutely understandable focus on scrupulous accuracy, that is before my time, but I am sure there will be papers.

Q530 **Chair:** Who was the debate between? Who in the Cabinet Office? Do you know?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't know for sure. The briefing I had on arrival was that there had been a position taken from the Cabinet Office that, as I say, some of Mandelson's status meant that vetting might be unnecessary and that that had been a discussion for several days after the press notice. It had been resolved before Christmas and resolved in the FCDO's favour. I only mention it because to say now that it was always clear that his appointment was subject to vetting is something that the Committee should consider whether it needs to take more evidence on.

Q531 **Chair:** Before we move on, you are not sure who it was in the Cabinet Office, but can I ask this? Was it a politician or civil servants?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't know. I was not in post at the time. All I understand is that there was a live debate, I think at official level, but I could not swear to that.

Q532 **Chair:** Additional to that, was there other pressure put on you or on the Foreign Office?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Throughout January, honestly, my office and the Foreign Secretary's office were under constant pressure. There was an atmosphere of constant chasing: "When will this—"



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Q533 **Chair:** Daily phone calls?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I could not say for certain daily, but certainly very frequent from private office to private office, "Has this been delivered yet?" There was never any interest, as far as I recall, in "whether", but only an interest in "when".

Q534 **Chair:** When you say private office to private office, are you saying the private office of No. 10?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Yes, I am.

Q535 **Chair:** And who are we talking about there, then? Are we talking about Ailsa Terry?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am not going to say, Chair. I may no longer be a civil servant, but I did not come here today to scapegoat other civil servants; I came here to make sure the Committee understands the circumstances.

Q536 **Chair:** I understand that, but I also want to know who the source of this is, and I want to be able to get as much evidence as possible to be able to identify who the source of the pressure was. Let's see if I can ask you this way: from what you know, what was the source of the pressure?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I have said I think that the vector I was most conscious of was from the No. 10 private office.

Q537 **Chair:** The No. 10 private office is a means by which others ensure that things happen, so behind the No. 10 private office, who are we talking about putting pressure on the Foreign Office via the private office?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Thank you for asking it that way, Chair, because that is the reason I do not want to name other officials at No. 10. I think the private office would only have been feeling this pressure themselves if they were under pressure.

Q538 **Chair:** Yes. But could you answer the question?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't know.

Q539 **Chair:** We know that Morgan McSweeney was a protégé of Peter Mandelson. We know that he was very keen on Peter Mandelson getting the job, and that he resigned saying that it was all his fault and that he had advised the Prime Minister to appoint Peter Mandelson. He took it on the chin and took the blame. Was it him?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I'm afraid when I said I don't know, I meant it. I don't know. I told the Committee what I do know, which is that the Foreign Office was being chased very frequently and I do not hold the private secretary as responsible for that.

Q540 **Chair:** Was there any direct communication between anyone in No. 10 and you?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** No.



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Q541 **Chair:** So there was no one ringing you on your mobile phone, WhatsApping you or sending you any messages?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** No.

Q542 **Chair:** And your phone is presumably something that has been handed in as part of the Humble Address, and will be able to be investigated?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** It certainly will.

Q543 **Chair:** I was told that, when someone has finished being a civil servant, their phones are wiped and reused. Could you give us an undertaking to make sure that does not happen?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** My phone for the relevant period was downloaded before I left Government.

Q544 **Chair:** Very good. So it is private office to private office, with nobody contacting you directly, but as far as you are aware, a record was taken of the contact between private office and private office.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am sure there are records of interactions between us. I couldn't swear to what those are or how many of them there are; you will have to ask the Government that, I'm afraid.

Q545 **Chair:** No, but if it is a private office, it is your private office. No. 10 is contacting your private office and your officials are telling you, "We've had another phone call." In what other ways were you getting pressure?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Remember that I am talking about the whole of January here, the first three weeks of which I was not in post.

Q546 **Chair:** Were you actually in the Foreign Office, even though you were not in post?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I had a handover week the week before I took up the position, where Philip told me a bit about the job, and I sat in a room some distance from his and read a lot of papers.

Q547 **Chair:** Did he tell you that you were going to get a lot of pressure?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** He described to me the steps and the atmosphere that I've described to you.

Q548 **Chair:** Okay. During those two weeks in January, your office is getting pressure. We have heard about phone calls. What else is there—are there emails as well?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't think so. This is the natural thing in many ways: a private secretary wanting to know what is going on, and feeling under pressure themselves to deliver, is ringing up and saying, "Where are we on this? Can we make it happen? Can you deliver? Get on with it."

Q549 **Chair:** It is right, isn't it, that official records should be kept accurately and information should be handled as openly as possible within the legal framework, according to the code? There should be a record of all the phone calls that are made.



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**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I'm sorry, but if the modern civil servant made a record of every phone call that they received, they would do nothing else. I doubt there is a record of every phone call. I am sure there is a trail that explains that there was regular contact.

Q550 **Chair:** I thought that, genuinely, civil servants could not buy a cup of coffee without making a record of it.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't seem to be able to buy a coffee without someone following me down the road.

Q551 **Chair:** It'll pass. But seriously, it is part of the code, isn't it, to keep accurate official records and handle information as openly as possible within the legal framework? It is a really important part of this to keep records. I hear what you say—not every phone call—but a phone call from No. 10 saying, "Get on with it; we want to appoint Peter Mandelson as ambassador to the United States," is an important phone call, even if it does happen every day.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** It is, but if it is not telling the Department anything new, then there might be no need to record it each time we receive it.

Q552 **Chair:** But the need to record it is to show the extent of pressure that the Foreign Office was being put under by No. 10.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** As I say, I think that, when you take evidence from the Government, they will be able to describe that period to you, and I have tried to do my best to do so when I was only in post for one week of January.

**Chair:** Okay. Let's move on to 28 January, when UKSV recommended that developed vetting be denied, and identified that Peter Mandelson was a man of high concern. Do you recognise those two phrases as being applied to Peter Mandelson?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't, actually, but we can come on to that in a second.

Q553 **Chair:** Okay. We understand that those two things were what UKSV concluded about Peter Mandelson. Any questions that I ask you about this are not to be interpreted as questions about the content of that vetting. I do not want to hear about what was in it; I want to know what happened as a result of it. You had a meeting with the director of security, Ian Collard. Are you saying that he presented you with the findings and that you did not actually read them yourself?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** That is correct. Perhaps I could describe this meeting to you, if that would help.

Q554 **Chair:** Again, is there a note of it?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** There is a note of the decision. The meeting itself, of course, involved the team describing to me some of the issues and the way in which they proposed to manage them. It would not have been appropriate to record that in detail. The decision of what we agreed we



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would do and the ways in which we would manage it is recorded and is available in the Foreign Office.

Q555 **Chair:** And that record is part of a DV bundle, if I can call it that. There is the UKSV paperwork and then there is paperwork from the Foreign Office—there is a part one and a part two—and the record that you are talking about is part of that bundle and is not a free-standing document.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I think I know what you are driving at, but may I describe this in my own words? There has been a good deal of misunderstanding about this process, if I may say so. For the Foreign Office—and for several other Departments—UKSV does not “fail” a candidate.

Q556 **Chair:** I haven’t said that.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I know that—apologies, Chair—but others have. Nor does the Foreign Office overrule UKSV. The relationship between the two is set out in guidance and has been set out to this Committee and in Parliament. The outcome of the vetting process is what is decided by the Foreign Office on the basis of the UKSV findings and our own assessment of the risk and whether we can manage it. The meeting I had with the director on 29 January was an oral briefing; no documents were presented to me, nor did I particularly expect them to be. I have never seen a UKSV document.

I was briefed that UKSV considered Mandelson a borderline case and that they were leaning towards recommending that clearance be denied, but that the Foreign Office’s security department assessed that the risks identified as of highest concern by UKSV could be managed and/or mitigated. I was also told that the risks did not relate to Mandelson’s relationship with Jeffrey Epstein and that UKSV acknowledged—I don’t know in what way—that the Foreign Office might wish to grant clearance with appropriate risk management. We talked about what that appropriate risk management might be, and the grant of clearance—the internal record of that decision—records the grant of clearance and also the mitigations.

Q557 **Chair:** I do not really follow why you would not know the contents of the UKSV document and their concerns or even that they said that there was high concern about Peter Mandelson. I do not understand how you can not know that if you are considering what the mitigations are. You cannot have the mitigations without knowing what the problem is.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** The risks were explained to me, but I have not seen the underlying documentation. That is what I am saying. That obviously strikes members of the Committee as odd, but in all my years as a civil servant—many of them as a relatively senior one—I have never seen a UKSV document, other than the ones that I have filled in myself.

That does not surprise me. The Government makes very clear in public guidance that for anybody to be briefed, outside the vetting security



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process, on the information into or findings of a UKSV process has to be for, I think I quote, “wholly exceptional circumstances”.

Q558 **Chair:** This is a wholly exceptional circumstance, surely.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** No. What I was told was absolutely within normal parameters of a set of findings from UKSV, and the Department assessing those. They were issues that the Department felt it had long experience and deep capability of assessing. It had experience of coming up with a plan for how those could be managed and clearance granted. That is not unusual in this process. I admit that it was unusual that I was briefed on it; I was not surprised to be briefed on it, given the prominence and profile of the case, but the underlying interaction between UKSV and the Foreign Office and the decision-making process were entirely standard.

Q559 **Chair:** But when you were given your oral briefing, you claimed that you were given the impression that Peter Mandelson was a borderline case, not a case of high concern or one whereby UKSV was recommending denial of vetting.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** That is correct. I was told—let me be completely precise—that UKSV were leaning towards recommending against, but accepted that it was a borderline case. It is important to say that, when we are dealing with documents and releases of documents, inevitably things look quite black and white. My understanding is that the personnel security team in the Foreign Office and the vetting team in UKSV are interacting about literally hundreds of DV cases a day. We are a DV by default Department, as you know, Chair. That means that we have thousands of people who hold DV in the Foreign Office, many of whom are renewing their DV, and new people are arriving, requiring DV. We are one of the biggest customers for DV services.

Q560 **Chair:** I hear you—I understand this—but this really was exceptional. There is not any other DV case for which you were getting daily phone calls from No. 10. This was different. You were being put under pressure and—if you don’t mind me saying—I just find it remarkable that you got a completely different view of what UKSV were saying about this from that which I understand is written down.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Respectfully, I disagree, Chair. The Department’s security team are extremely professional, experienced people. They have a live dialogue with UKSV. The risks that were identified were ones that they felt they understood well and could manage.

Q561 **Chair:** Okay. Was there anything in the DV that was not already in the public realm? Was there anything that had been identified that all of us did not already know?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** As I wrote to you this morning, Chair—I am sorry if this begins to come back to your opening remarks—I may no longer be an official, but I don’t think I can open that box. This system absolutely depends on candidates for vetting knowing that the Government will completely respect the confidences that they share.



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Q562 **Chair:** Yes, I know—so don't tell me; if there was anything that was not already in the public realm, just tell me that there was something that was not already in the public realm. Don't tell me what it was; just tell me, "Oh, yes, there was something else but, sorry, I can't tell you."

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am afraid I am not prepared to do that, Chair. What that leads to is an absolute storm of questions as to what that issue was.

Q563 **Chair:** I am not going to ask you a storm of questions. I am going to move on to my last question after this.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am sorry, Chair. I trust you, but I am not sure the whole of the rest of the world will hold off from wanting to know.

Q564 **Chair:** All right. Where is the note of these meetings?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** The decision that was reached in the meeting was recorded the following day.

Q565 **Chair:** And you did not make a separate note of your thought process and the reasons you decided what you did?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** No.

Q566 **Chair:** So it is all on the DV documents?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** The outcome of the consideration by the Foreign Office is recorded in the decision that was issued the following day.

Q567 **Chair:** Apart from your meeting with Ian Collard, did you have a meeting with anyone else before you made the decision that you came to about giving Peter Mandelson clearance, subject to mitigations?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** No.

Q568 **Chair:** So it was just that meeting with Ian Collard—no other meeting.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Correct.

Q569 **Chair:** And the decision was made there and then?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** The decision is always formally made by the personnel security team. They are—this is a bit of jargon, although it is also plain English—the decision maker for the Foreign Office. The minute recording the Foreign Office's decision says, "ESND have decided to grand clearance."

Q570 **Chair:** Was there anybody else in that meeting, apart from you and him?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I think at least one member of Ian's team was there, but I couldn't swear to it.

Q571 **Chair:** Would their job be to take a minute of the discussion?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I hope not, Chair, because the issues that we discussed should not have been recorded at the tier of classification that would be available.



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Q572 **Chair:** Even if it was then put into the DV documents?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** They will have recorded the decision back in the secure system that we use with UKSV.

Q573 **Chair:** Did you tell anybody once you had made the decision?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Did I tell anybody that Peter Mandelson had been granted DV clearance?

Q574 **Chair:** That Peter Mandelson had been cleared, yes.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am sure I will have told probably the Foreign Secretary and No. 10 but, to be honest, it will have been implicitly clear within a day or two anyway, because we had always said that he would not be sent on posting to Washington without it.

Q575 **Chair:** You were getting a lot of pressure and maybe daily phone calls. Surely, it would have crossed your mind that, "I am going to ring X"—you are not prepared to tell me who it is—"and tell them: for heaven's sake, get off my back, I've cleared him."

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Honestly, it is plausible, but I don't remember doing so.

Q576 **Chair:** It is likely, more than plausible, that you would have rung somebody up immediately after you had made the decision and told them that you had made the decision.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** It is also possible that I am capable of a bit of obstinacy, and people ringing me all the time asking me—

Q577 **Chair:** I can understand you; I get the vibe. Nevertheless, I do not believe that you did not tell someone. You know where I am going next: where is the note of the phone call, and who did you tell that the decision had been made?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't think that I made such a phone call, and if I did, it would have been simply to share the outcome of the process, which is that DV had been given.

Q578 **Chair:** So might you have discussed it with someone else, and got them to tell whoever it was who was pushing the Foreign Office what had happened?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** It is possible, but—Chair, honestly, I am trying to do my best to help you, but I think this is a bit of a red herring. Within hours, as the Humble Address pack makes clear, Peter Mandelson was written to with a contract of employment and a posting letter to Washington, which the Foreign Office had always said he would only get once he had passed DV. So it was absolutely clear. Not only that, but within minutes of us recording our decision to grant DV, Peter will have received a DV certificate, and it is entirely possible that Mandelson himself will have then told people that it had been granted. I don't think I felt under any obligation to tell anybody.



Q579 **Chair:** I think you are under an obligation to keep accurate minutes and notes of decisions that you make, actions that you take and your reasoning. It is quite clear from the civil service code that it is your responsibility to keep accurate official records, and handle information as openly as possible within a legal framework, that you must not be influenced by improper pressure from others and that you must not ignore inconvenient facts or relevant considerations when providing advice or making decisions. Given that is what the code says, in order to be able to cover yourself—never mind anything else—you would take a note in order to make it clear that you were not subject to undue pressure, you were not ignoring inconvenient facts and you were behaving properly. But it does not look like there have been any notes about any of this.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Can I make two points? I have been a civil servant for a quarter of a century; I could recite the code to you and I believe it—along with probably the Book of Common Prayer, it is one of the two things I can hold in my memory, and I have abided by it. You will find, when the records are finally opened, a record of the decision that is clear. What I am saying to you is that, while there was an atmosphere of pressure, the Department rigorously followed the process, and we did so, frankly—as I understand it—despite some in Government believing it was not a process that we ever needed to follow.

I ask you to reflect for a second: my life might have been considerably easier over the last two or three days if I had wanted to come to this Committee and say that I was put under such pressure that I just agreed to it. But that would not be true. I was given a set of serious reflections on the risks, raised by a bunch of professionals who had come across these risks before and thought the Foreign Office could manage them well, and—at least the way I was briefed—that was a position that was implicitly understood by UKSV. We then recorded that decision, put in place the mitigations, and clearance was granted.

Q580 **Chair:** Again, the code does say that if you believe you are being required to act in a way that conflicts with the code, you should speak to your line manager, which leads me to this: your line manager would be Chris Wormald, presumably; is it right that you are saying that you never told him about any of the difficulties and pressure you were facing? In fact, did you not even tell him that UKSV had said that Peter Mandelson was a person of high concern, and that developed vetting should be denied?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** As I say, while I think the Department felt under pressure, we were proud of the fact that we had not bowed to that pressure. Therefore, I didn't have a complaint to make to Chris because I was confident that we were handling it well. I should say—on a lighter note—that I think by the time clearance was granted I had not yet had my introductory meeting with the Cabinet Secretary, so these were very early days.

Q581 **Chair:** And it wouldn't be part of your meeting with him to say, "Well, we had a few wrinkles, but it doesn't matter; it was sorted out", or "UKSV was pushing in one direction, but the Foreign Office has, through putting



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conditions on Peter Mandelson, covered that"? You would not have been tempted to say that to Chris Wormald? You would not have been tempted to say that to Morgan McSweeney? You would not have been tempted to say that to anyone?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Absolutely not, because my understanding of custom, practice and guidance is that the decision making within the box of the vetting process must remain entirely confidential.

Q582 **Chair:** But if you had put it in any of the ways I suggested, you would not have been disclosing any of the content of that DV; you would just have been disclosing the fact that it had been passed, but that there had been difficulties, and surely that does not disclose anything of substance. That is all process.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I think it would have been, Chair. I think it would have been me just trying to shift responsibility on to others. It is absolutely clear that the permanent under-secretary is responsible for the security of the Department. You know well from the work of this Committee that the Foreign Office is the most attacked Government Department—as attacked as the rest of Government put together. That was a heavy responsibility during my tenure as permanent under-secretary. If I had started sharing that burden with others and saying, "This was a bit of a tricky one, but I think we can manage", what I am doing is offloading that responsibility. The responsibility, ultimately, was on me, and I carried it out rigorously and to the best of my ability.

Q583 **Chair:** If you had widened the circle, if you had made notes or if there had been more paperwork, then would not those have been disclosable under the Freedom of Information Act? Is not the only reason that we even know that UKSV had said that developed vetting should be denied because of the Humble Address? Otherwise, we would never have known; there would never have been any paperwork, and there would never have been an audit trail. There would never have been a trail of decision making. We would never have known.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Excuse me, Chair. I think I'm following you; if you are saying to me that vetting documents are outside the Freedom of Information Act, that is absolutely true, and I think it is an incredibly important tenet of how the system works.

**Chair:** I am not saying otherwise.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** You cannot have a system in which the hundreds, if not thousands, of candidates for vetting think that, at some point in the process, a line manager's line manager's line manager, who they have never met, might choose to see their boss and say, "This was a bit of a tricky one. The UKSV documentation erred against, but do not worry, I managed through." I think that would be a breach of trust.

Q584 **Chair:** Olly, we support you completely on this; that is not a problem. The problem is the process. The problem is that if there had been more paperwork and if you had discussed it with anyone, then it might have



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come out that there had at least been, to put it as mildly as possible, a wrinkle.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Excuse me, Chair; you are a lawyer, and I am not, but my understanding of the Freedom of Information Act is that the exemptions, if they are available, are about the nature of the material, not about the type of communication. I think if I had gone to somebody else, talked about a vetting issue and that had been recorded, it would have been covered by the same exemptions. My point is that I should never have done it, and I didn't.

**Chair:** Okay. Thank you very much. I will pass on to Sir John.

Q585 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Thank you very much, Chair. Colleagues, I am going to move on to other aspects, but I just want to probe a little bit further on one or two of the answers you have already given, Sir Oliver. You have described to us the situation when you arrived in post and the extent to which various steps had already been completed, including due diligence, the approval of the King and the obtaining of agrément. Were you surprised that all those had been completed without the vetting process having been done?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Thank you, Sir John. In the narrow sense, I was not surprised, because I had been following the news, so when I arrived in post, I knew perfectly well that the Prime Minister had made his appointment and that it had been announced. Of course, in my handover with Philip, he told me about agrément and the other steps that you mentioned. As I look back, while the Foreign Office did not see it, as I understand it, at the time, I am also completely unsurprised by Simon Case's advice to the Prime Minister of November 2024 that, if he wished to make a political appointment, it would be the safest course to achieve security clearance before making the announcement. Philip will speak for himself, and maybe he did, but, had I been in post at around that time, that is what I would have advised as well.

Q586 **Sir John Whittingdale:** So you think it should have been obtained before those steps were taken.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** As others have publicly said in the last few days, this is unusual because most people appointed to ambassadorial roles already hold clearance. That would have been a very sensible position to be in, and it is what I would have advised in this case too. I should say that, in the American context—as you may well be aware, Sir John—it is a particularly sensitive issue. The United States Government are very hot on the clearances that people hold, so it would have been a sensible precaution.

Q587 **Sir John Whittingdale:** And actually, had approval not been granted, and the position were therefore revoked after agrément had already been obtained, would that have damaged our relations with the United States in your view?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Yes, I think it would have damaged them. The process of getting agrément was taken at quite some pace, and I think



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that it was still technically delivered, by just one working day, by the Biden Administration. If the nomination had changed after that point, the incoming Administration may well have commented on it publicly, and it would have caused quite an issue in the relationship, yes.

**Q588 Sir John Whittingdale:** You describe the dismissive approach of No. 10 in your letter, and you say that it came from the fact that all these steps had already been taken. Was there anything further that indicated to you that No. 10 really did not regard this as anything more than a formality that had to be completed?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** To stay scrupulous, nothing I can bear personal witness to. Certainly, in my transition into the job, I was obviously briefed about the debate there had been about whether to vet at all, and that all added to a picture.

**Q589 Sir John Whittingdale:** Can I also ask you a little bit more about the meeting you had on 29 January, which resulted in the decision to give DV clearance? You have said that you were briefed about the contents of the report by UKSV, but that you did not see it.

We understand that there is a template decision-making form—indeed, the Government have published it—in which there are three boxes at the end. There is a green one; there is an amber one, which says that it has been approved but there remain valid concerns; and the final red one says “Clearance Denied or Withdrawn”. We are told that the tick was in the red box: “Clearance Denied or Withdrawn”. That does not seem to me to be borderline. Were you aware that the tick was in the red box?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Before the Government chose to publish it, I had never seen a form like that. If I may make two points, I certainly do not recall the way in which the UKSV findings were presented to me as being that definitive. As I say, it was briefed to me that they were “leaning against”—that is the phrase I remember.

**Q590 Sir John Whittingdale:** But leaning against is not the same as the decision. We are told that the decision—or the recommendation, rather—from UKSV was clear. The recommendation was denial. It was not leaning; it was denial.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** You asked me what I heard in that meeting, and I am trying to remember to the best of my ability.

On the other point, which I think in the way you asked the question you understand perfectly well, but just in case, that form is consumed differently in the Foreign Office and half a dozen other Departments than in other parts of the system. Those are recommendations, not decisions. What my team will have done, I am sure, is break that down, go through the specific issues that had led UKSV to their concern and then make an assessment as to whether they can be managed. That is what came to me.

**Q591 Sir John Whittingdale:** Your team did that. The meeting you had was with only the director of security, so it would have been his officials who



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had broken it down, and he would have reported to you the outcome of that process.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Correct.

Q592 **Sir John Whittingdale:** A note was then circulated afterwards, saying what the decision was. Did that note simply say, "It has been decided that Lord Mandelson is to be granted clearance", or did it say, "Despite the recommendation of UKSV, it has been decided"?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I think that minute is not a minute I can properly discuss, Sir John. It is no longer, sadly, my document and, as I said in answer to the Chair's questions earlier, it is a minute that certainly would give you, the public, but also our adversaries, quite a strong sense of how we try to manage that process.

Q593 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Are you aware that anybody else, other than you and the director of security who took that decision, was aware that the decision went against the recommendation of UKSV?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Apologies for repeating myself, but I was told that it was borderline and that they were leaning against—recommending against. I do not remember anybody at any stage saying anything different to me—certainly not about red boxes. I'm sorry, I don't know if that answers your question, but—

Q594 **Sir John Whittingdale:** I'm afraid it doesn't quite. Essentially, my question is: you took a decision in a meeting with just one other person present; was anybody else aware after that meeting that the decision had been to overturn or to go against the recommendation of UKSV, or was it simply reported, "We've had a meeting and we've decided that he should obtain clearance"?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am sure the director—sorry, I did say in answer to the Chair earlier that I do not think it was just the director in the meeting with me; I think there was at least one member of his team there. I am sure they will have debriefed to some extent on the conversation, but I don't know precisely what was said.

Q595 **Sir John Whittingdale:** But did you tell Ministers at all, or No. 10? You told them the outcome of your decision—the outcome of the meeting—but did you tell them about the recommendation made by UKSV?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** No, and months and months later, when, in the immediate aftermath of Mandelson's sacking, we were thinking internally about how to respond to legitimate questions this Committee and others had about that process, my recollection is—in a way I wasn't surprised by it—the direction from No. 10 was, "We must make clear that these decisions were taken entirely independently of Ministers and that they were not consulted other than to be told the outcome."

Q596 **Edward Morello:** I want to clarify the conversation that happened in the meeting. Presumably, your chief of security comes to you and explains the concerns raised, but also the mitigation that he believes the Department



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can put in place. At that point, is it a recommendation to you or is it your judgment on whether or not those mitigations are sufficient for you to be satisfied on the granting of DV?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I recall it as a recommendation to me, but before you read too much into that, I was accountable.

**Edward Morello:** I accept that.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** So that is not an attempt to say, "Oh, you know, if only they"—they are entirely professional people. They care deeply about national security. They run one of the toughest security functions in Government, given the attack we are under. I trusted their judgment and I backed it.

Q597 **Edward Morello:** I totally accept that, but I just want to be clear that the advice you were given in that meeting—that conversation—was, "We understand these risks, we believe we can mitigate against them, and therefore you should be comfortable making the decision to grant it," or, "It's our decision that it can be granted given that these mitigations are in place."

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Obviously, we are at a stage in this whole episode where precise words are very important, and I wish I could recall them that precisely, Mr Morello, but I don't think that's an unfair representation.

Q598 **Edward Morello:** Okay. You have already outlined the extreme levels of political pressure that you were under to complete this process. Is there any suggestion that that pressure filtered down to the Department that ultimately was making the recommendations to you? Were you satisfied in that meeting that the options that were proposed to you and the decisions that they were proposing were come to independently of the political pressure that was being exerted on you, or will they also have felt the political pressure that was on the Department?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** That is an extremely good question and I am very confident in answering. They are clever people. They will have been very aware of the pressure. I also have complete confidence that their recommendations to me and the discussion we had and the decision we made were rigorously independent of that pressure.

Q599 **Dan Carden:** What I want to ask, having heard everything you have given us so far, is: what do you think would have happened if you had denied clearance? How would you have gone about that? What would the impact of that be? Would it even be possible?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Maybe this is the first time, remembering back to the Chair's introduction, where I can abandon the civil servant's response of saying, "That's a hypothetical question." I think it would have been very difficult indeed, Mr Carden. If I can walk you back to the situation I came into the post in, we had been through all of these steps very publicly, in which the Prime Minister's nominee had been put out there to the public, announced, blessed by the King and agreed by the US Government. We were in receipt of formal letters from No. 10 telling us to get on with it



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quickly. We had engineered agrément to arrive just before the inauguration, as required by that original letter that has been published as part of the Humble Address response.

I am not trying to hide from your question, but I suppose all I can do is agree with the premise that, against that backdrop, the Foreign Office saying, "Okay, but sorry, we can't grant him clearance," would have been a very, very difficult problem that I would have been landing the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister with. Given the commentary over the last few days, I am acutely conscious of that, and I have done the odd bit of what-iffery myself. But just in case this is the thrust of your question, that was not what was on my mind as we took this decision.

I have spent 25 years now—just—as a civil servant. For about half of that period I have been in jobs that have an acute bearing on national security. I live and breathe this stuff, possibly to a fault, Mr Carden, and I believe passionately that it is one of the jobs of the civil service, creatively and flexibly, to support Ministers in protecting national security. That is what I wanted the team performing this assessment to feel, and that is the conversation that was going on in my head as I listened to their recommendations.

**Q600 Dan Carden:** If we go back again, the Cabinet Secretary at the time, Lord Case, advised the Prime Minister to carry out security vetting prior to announcing any appointment. Why would that advice not have been followed?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Here I will take the civil servants answer, if I may. It is a hypothetical that I cannot possibly have a bearing on.

**Q601 Dan Carden:** I wonder why it would not have happened automatically? If that was the view of the civil service, that vetting would be gained before an announcement made, why would that advice not just automatically be followed?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I can only guess. The Prime Minister had received a due diligence report, in which the very well-known reputational risks of appointing Mandelson were presumably made clear to him. He had advice on different options for the post. I assume he would have looked at the risks around Mandelson, and maybe he thought, "This is a very well-known character. I am making a risk judgment that his political skills and nous in Washington are just what this country needs at this time," and he decided, "There's not much more that any process can tell me ahead of me making this announcement and making this appointment."

As I've said earlier in response to questions, I hope that, if I'd been in the system at the time those decisions were being made, first, that No. 10 or the Cabinet Office might have wanted to consult me. I do not think at the time the Foreign Office was consulted. I hope my advice would have been, "That's adding unnecessarily to your risk, Prime Minister."

**Q602 Dan Carden:** Yesterday, the Prime Minister said, "Foreign Office officials granted him developed vetting clearance, against the specific



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recommendation of the United Kingdom Security Vetting that developed vetting clearance should be denied.” And then you have said to us that UKSV did not fail Mandelson and FCDO did not overrule their decision. Is it your contention that the Prime Minister is misunderstanding the process which you followed?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I can only describe the process as I understand it. I hope that, having been deputy national security adviser for four years, responsible for vetting and for the SVAP clearance process that often follows it, and then having spent a year and a bit as permanent under-secretary, my understanding of it is reasonably good.

But also, you do not have to believe me. There are guidance documents available in the Foreign Office that describe this precisely to candidates for vetting. UKSV is a service provider, and the Foreign Office takes the decision based on its own risk assessment and whether it thinks that the risks can be managed. That is precisely what we did in this case. The outcome is the Foreign Office decision. That is a professional decision on security advice. It is not the quixotic decision of some permanent secretary who thinks he is under pressure. In this case, the team thought it wise and prudent to take me through their reasoning.

Q603 **Dan Carden:** Finally, is the Prime Minister right to have expected you to provide him with more information on the vetting process?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I hope it is clear from everything I have said so far that I believe that is a misunderstanding—a dangerous misunderstanding—of the necessity of confidentiality of the process. I was interested to read Lord Hague on this today, and even David Lammy—the former Foreign Secretary, now Deputy Prime Minister—on Saturday. Both have said, in different language, that they have never had vetting issues discussed with them in all their time as Ministers, and nor would they expect to. I am afraid that that is exactly the culture that I have been brought up in. It is supported by guidance. You are not supposed to share the findings and reports of UKSV, other than in the exceptional circumstances where doing so allows for the specific mitigation of risk.

Q604 **Edward Morello:** You have made clear the exceptional circumstances surrounding the appointment of Sir Peter, the amount of stuff that had happened before the security vetting process had been completed, and that it was highly unusual and not the best practice for the way that the Foreign Office likes to run things.

Were there other political appointees? Did the No. 10 operation propose any other political appointees during your tenure as permanent secretary? If so, did they abide by the standard practice during that process, in that no appointment could be made until the process had been completed, and as a result of that, were you more comfortable in not appointing those people?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** In my tenure as permanent under-secretary, I think there was only ever one other serious proposal made, and I think that was in March 2025.



**Edward Morello:** To what role?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** There were several discussions initiated by No. 10 with me about potentially finding a head of mission opportunity for Matthew Doyle, who was then the Prime Minister's director of communications. I was under strict instruction not to discuss that with the then Foreign Secretary, which was uncomfortable.

The context here, Mr Morello, was that although I was still in my early months in the job, I had already concluded—as indeed I think gave evidence to this Committee about not long afterwards—that the Foreign Office needed quite serious reform. I was in the process of talking to the top team about quite a profound restructuring involving job losses, and I found it very hard to think how I would explain to the office what the credentials of Matthew were to be in an important head of mission role, when I was in danger of making very senior, very experienced diplomats leave the office.

I did my duty. I looked at the forward look of available jobs. I shared with No. 10 what some of those might be. It was, to be honest, hard to find something that I thought might be suitable, but I also felt quite uncomfortable about it, and I kept giving advice that I thought this would be very hard for the office and was hard for me personally to defend.

Your question, given what we are talking about today, is about the interaction with vetting. That did not arise, because Matthew was already in post in No. 10 as a special adviser. After a day or two, the idea seemed to get dropped. Going back to your question, I do not think the specific issue of a political appointee and the interaction with the vetting process came up again during my time.

**Edward Morello:** Thank you.

Q605 **Chair:** There is some mounting confusion on the Committee—it might be with the public as well. Are you saying that UKSV didn't recommend that DV be denied?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** No, I am trying to tell the Committee what I was briefed in that meeting on the 29th.

Q606 **Chair:** You are saying borderline.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I was told that it was a borderline case, and that they leant against.

Q607 **Chair:** Borderline and leant against. And that is different, is it, from recommending that DV be denied?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I can only tell you the words that I heard.

Q608 **Sir John Whittingdale:** I said to you, "You were not aware that the red box saying 'clearance denied' had a tick in it."

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Until the Government published it, I had never seen a sheet like that, Sir John.



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Q609 **Sir John Whittingdale:** But even if you hadn't seen the sheet, you didn't know that the clear recommendation—final decision—of UKSV was “clearance denied”.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I was told that it was a borderline case and that UKSV were leaning against granting clearance.

Q610 **Richard Foord:** Thank you very much, Sir Olly, for appearing before us. You have explained that a lot of these decisions were made before you were appointed as permanent under-secretary. I am curious to know: why did Sir Philip Barton's tenure as permanent under-secretary conclude eight months before it otherwise would have?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't know for sure. Philip and I have of course talked a lot, especially in that handover week, and I remain in touch with him and am proud to call him a friend. It is not completely unnatural that a new Government and a new Foreign Secretary respect and accept the permanent under-secretary that they have in post when they arrive, but after a while—I don't know whether this was more Mr Lammy or Sir Philip—having eased the new Government in sensibly and supported them in their early months, one side or the other suggests it is time for a change. If you want to know more about that, I think you will probably have to ask Mr Lammy or Sir Philip.

Q611 **Richard Foord:** Certainly, and perhaps the Committee will take evidence from them or others. The national security adviser, Jonathan Powell, when he was reflecting on this time last September, recalled that Sir Philip Barton also had reservations about the appointment of Lord Mandelson. What did you know about Sir Philip's reservations when you were preparing to take over from him?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Again, I am reluctant to speak for Philip, if I may say that, because so much of this has become so loaded and controversial. I do remember that the general atmosphere in the Foreign Office when I arrived, which I think Philip probably shared, was that a number of senior appointments made under the new Government, which might in the past—or sometimes always in the past—have been occupied by diplomats, were now going to one type or another of outsider. In the back of his mind, he may even have been thinking about me as he said that, but Jonathan Powell and others would have been in that category. I think he and certainly others who were then my senior team as I arrived in the office were nervous that this was a sort of creep of senior diplomatic roles going to non-career diplomats. Of course, it is possible that he was worried about exactly the same reputational risks that were detailed for the Prime Minister at the time that he made the appointment, but that is a matter for him to talk to you about.

Q612 **Richard Foord:** In that time when you were the designate permanent under-secretary, what conversations did you have with advisers or officials that might have led you to believe that Lord Mandelson needed to take up this role regardless of the outcome of developed vetting?



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**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I can say with certainty that it was never put to me that way. As I hope I have said clearly to the Committee, I certainly did arrive to an atmosphere where this was not just, "Please get this done quickly," but, "And get it done." That was, I think, a pretty unmistakable feeling. As I hope I have also been clear to the Committee, I don't think I allowed that to cloud my judgment; certainly, the security team did not.

Q613 **Richard Foord:** I want to look at a couple of pieces of evidence, one of which was released in the tranche of documents—volume 1 of the return to the Humble Address. This is a December 2024 email from the No. 10 private secretary for foreign affairs, Ms Terry. She wrote on 20 December 2024 to Lord Mandelson: "I understand you haven't received the attached forms yet which Morgan mentioned to you this morning...we are here to help as needed." Why would it be necessary for the Prime Minister's chief of staff to have a conversation with an ambassador who was about to take post about joining forms?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't know. I wasn't there and I wasn't privy to those conversations—sorry. Having got that out of the way, to try to be more helpful, the Chair said in her opening questions that Mr McSweeney and Mandelson were close; I therefore suspect that Morgan was in touch with him, congratulating him on his appointment and then telling him he would have some paperwork to do.

Q614 **Chair:** It was more than paperwork; it was conflict of interest forms.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I agree. Of course, when I arrived in post, this was a part of the process I then had to oversee. It was an important and occasionally difficult part of the process, but all I am trying to explain is that I suspect that when a friend talks to an appointee that they are congratulating, it is, "The officials will be in touch with some stuff you have to do."

Q615 **Richard Foord:** Going back to the point when Sir Philip was still permanent under-secretary, it is reported by, I think it's Sam Coates, that Morgan McSweeney, the chief of staff, rang Sir Philip and said in terms stronger than those that I can use before the watershed—

**Chair:** I think you should.

**Richard Foord:** Well, I will just say that it was, "Just approve it," with a term stronger than that.

**Chair:** "Just fucking approve it."

**Richard Foord:** Does that accord with your impression when you took over from Sir Philip?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I recall Philip saying to me—certainly, Philip's handover to me has contributed to my strong sense that there was an atmosphere of pressure and a certain dismissiveness about this DV process, which I hope I have tried already to be honest with the Committee about. I don't remember Philip using those words. Also, I am



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proud to say Philip is probably not the sort of person who would report them verbatim.

Q616 **Chair:** Can I ask you, because it came up in the evidence you gave in answer to Edward, about Matthew Doyle? We probably should ask you who at No. 10 suggested that Matthew Doyle be given the post as head of mission somewhere.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't know what the origin of the suggestion was and I don't know exactly who was behind it or how serious it was. It was serious enough for the No. 10 private office to ring up the head of the diplomatic service and ask for a forward look of available head of mission jobs. That is the point at which I thought I needed to lay down some markers.

Q617 **Sir John Whittingdale:** And who told you not to tell the Foreign Secretary?

**Chair:** Exactly.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** The No. 10 private office was clear that this was so sensitive, because it was about the Prime Minister's own dispositions for his own senior staff, that I should keep that to myself for now.

Q618 **Edward Morello:** Did Sir Philip raise any similar incidents during his tenure? Did he warn you to expect this kind of behaviour from No. 10?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** He didn't. I have been around long enough, Mr Morello, that I remember making one or two of these calls myself as a No. 10 private secretary back in the day, so I don't want to—

Q619 **Chair:** You remember making calls to the head of the Foreign Office saying, "Can you get a job for my mate, but don't tell the Foreign Secretary"?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I hope I wouldn't have used that—well, certainly I don't remember trying to get any jobs for my mates.

Q620 **Chair:** "Can you help get a job for X's mates, but don't tell the Foreign Secretary"?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** It is so long ago, to be honest, that I can't remember the terms of the phone call I am recalling. I don't think it is completely surprising that the Prime Minister would be so sensitive about the way in which he was dealing with a member of his senior team, and particularly a director of communications who is in minute-by-minute contact with the media, that he would want that kept to a very, very tight group of people at the time.

To be honest, the reason it surfaced again in my memory recently is that, while I did keep this on very tight hold at the time, I think subsequently—or maybe simultaneously—Mandelson was asked about whether there was a job that could be made available in the US network, so I think the fact that No. 10 was interested in potential diplomatic options for Doyle was probably a bit more broadly known than I realised at the time.



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Q621 **Aphra Brandreth:** Before moving on to the main things I want to discuss, on the point that has just been talked about, when exactly were these conversations taking place?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I'm afraid I can't tell you that precisely. Sometime in March last year.

Q622 **Aphra Brandreth:** What was the reason, in your opinion, that it didn't move forwards?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't know. It is as likely, I suspect, to be about Doyle's own preferences and circumstances as anything I said. I can only tell you what I said, which is that I thought this would be difficult for the Foreign Office. It was difficult for me personally, honestly, as a leader, to explain why very talented and experienced diplomats were having to leave the organisation and people who would be widely considered to have rather fewer credentials were being put in these important jobs. It was very difficult for me, and I explained that. I don't know what led to the idea being withdrawn.

Q623 **Aphra Brandreth:** Thank you. I want to focus on the decision process that you went through to consider the recommendation of UK Security Vetting and the ultimate decision that you made to grant security clearance. When you were considering the recommendation and the risks that were brought to you by UKSV, did the findings, in your view, materially alter the type and level of risk that had already been brought to the Prime Minister's attention?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** If I may say so, Ms Brandreth, that is a clever version of the Chair's question earlier. What you are inviting me to do is to say whether there are particular risks that were new to me.

**Chair:** My questions were clever.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I didn't say cleverer, Chair. You are inviting me to say whether there were risks that were not already known in the public domain. I am afraid that if there is one thing keeping me sane over the last few days, it is that I will defend the integrity of this process. I hope that I have a reputation, if you speak to other politicians—former Ministers, the four Prime Ministers I have delivered for personally—as a person who gets things done and who tries to deliver for Ministers, get through process and make things happen. I have always seen vetting and national security as slightly different, so I will hold to that position, if I may.

Q624 **Aphra Brandreth:** Okay. You were required to make the ultimate decision to grant or not grant security clearance. Given that, as you have said, the public announcement of Lord Mandelson's appointment had already been made, in December '24, before you took up the post, given that the White House had already confirmed it would accept, and given that His Majesty the King's agreement had been sought, did you feel that you were effectively left with no option but to manage the risks or to cause a diplomatic incident?



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**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I was very conscious that, if we went through the rigour of our process and decided against granting clearance, that would have caused a real problem for the Government and a problem for the country. But, as I have been trying to explain, I was conscious of that without letting it influence my judgment, let alone transferring any of that atmosphere on to the people charged with actually making that assessment.

Q625 **Aphra Brandreth:** Could there have been information from UKSV that would have changed your decision?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Yes, absolutely. Trying to hold to my comments of a few minutes ago, I can certainly imagine risks that would have been briefed to me in that meeting that my team would not have been comfortable managing—and, even if they hadn't have been, I wouldn't have been. In my tenure in the job, the normal way in which the permanent under-secretary interacts with the vetting system, Ms Brandreth, is in vetting appeals. As I have said, we have thousands of people who enjoy the highest level of clearance. Sadly, people's circumstances change—sometimes they do silly things; sometimes this is for sad reasons—and that leads to their clearance being downgraded or even withdrawn. In those circumstances, given all I have said in answer to other questions, the permanent under-secretary is the ultimate authority on whether they retain their clearance and the person to whom those appeals come.

The reason I am telling you that is that I hate doing it, honestly. It is one of the most emotional things I got involved with in my time in the job. You are conscious that you are sitting there with a manilla folder and a recommendation from the personnel security team that is about to shatter someone's job. I do not say this with pride or machismo, but I have signed those papers off sometimes after hours, having gone way into the small hours considering them. I take those responsibilities extremely seriously. I have been prepared to follow through on tough advice. I have even gone against advice to be more lenient where I don't think that is consonant with the vetting principles, but in this case I didn't feel under that pressure personally in terms of my judgment.

Q626 **Aphra Brandreth:** You say that you follow due process. Would you say that you would have made the same decision to grant clearance if it had been any other person being considered for ambassador? For example, if it had been a civil servant being considered rather than a political appointment, do you think you would have made the same judgment to grant clearance?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** The framework we applied—and therefore, yes, ultimately the decision—I think I would have applied in any case that had been brought to me. The only reason I am putting it that way, Ms Brandreth, is that of course this Committee today and the commentary is focusing on the unusual circumstance of this being a prime ministerial appointee and a political appointee, but Mandelson was also unusual in some other ways. He had had a much longer, much more senior and much



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more visible career than most people who came for vetting in the Foreign Office, with a wider range of contacts, risks and issues throughout his career and life. That is not unusual, but because he was a man with the longevity of career he had had and the seniority he had had, while the decision-making framework is the one I would have applied in any case, this was a richer picture than you would have had with a 21-year-old graduate coming in and asking for vetting for the first time.

**Q627 Aphra Brandreth:** We have talked a bit about the fact that the announcement was made prior to the security clearance being granted. If security clearance had been sought prior to the announcement of Lord Mandelson's appointment, would that have changed the judgment you made in granting security clearance?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Excuse me; may I check I am following you? Are you saying if they had started the vetting process before announcing him, or concluded the vetting process before announcing—

**Aphra Brandreth:** If they had concluded the security vetting process, as was Simon Case's recommendation, prior to formally making an announcement of the appointment, would that have changed the judgment that you made in terms of granting security clearance?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Just so we have our chronology right, it would not have been me making the judgment, but I am pretty confident that Philip would have assessed the recommendations of our personnel security team in the same way I did. I know I am trying to explain quite a complicated context to you. The atmosphere—and that directly relates, as you are implying, to the prominence of the appointment and the timing of the appointment relative to security vetting—all contributed to the context we were working in, but my solemn belief is that in the way in which we assessed the case and the conclusion we came to, we would have done the same at any juncture.

**Q628 Aphra Brandreth:** In retrospect, with everything that we know now, do you regret granting security clearance for Lord Mandelson?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I regret that this process was not done before announcement. I regret that the due diligence process—which threw up, as I understand it, serious reputational risks—did not colour the Prime Minister's judgment in making the appointment. There is quite a lot about this situation over the last year and a half that I regret. I have no regrets about the work of my brilliant team and the judgment that we came to.

**Q629 Aphra Brandreth:** But you say you regret that the announcement was made before security clearance was granted; yet, at the same time, you have said that it would make no difference to your decision to grant security clearance. What would you have done differently in that case? Is it that you would have then chosen to alert the Foreign Secretary or the Prime Minister?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I think the main distinction I am making, Ms Brandreth, is that the atmosphere I have described just would not have



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existed. The team would have been able to do this work, and the then permanent under-secretary would have been able to consider it, without that same sense that they were operating under this pressure and environment. The benefit for the Government—for the Prime Minister—would have been that exactly the kind of responsible questions you are asking me today, some of them, would not need to have been asked, because it would have been clear that the Prime Minister had wanted this clearance given before he made the appointment.

**Q630 Chair:** What I do not understand from your answer is that you seem to be implying that, if there had been due diligence done before the appointment, the Prime Minister might have come to a different conclusion; but if security vetting had been done before the appointment, you would not have come to a different conclusion.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am sorry if I was unclear, Chair. Due diligence, as I understand it, was done before the appointment, and I think that has now been released in the Humble Address papers. What I feel sad about is that the Prime Minister's nominee went ahead despite that due diligence. It doesn't matter what I think—I think the Prime Minister, as I understand it, has essentially said that himself: he regrets the appointment.

**Q631 Abtisam Mohamed:** I have a few follow-up questions. You referenced feeling political pressure, and you also mentioned dismissiveness. The pressure I understand, in terms of the phone calls you spoke about. What did the dismissiveness look like?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** My word "dismissiveness" comes all the way back to a letter to the Foreign Office, which—I do not blame the person who signed it—is out there now in the public domain, thanks to the Humble Address. It says, "Take forward the necessary arrangements at pace. We want handover in advance of the US inauguration." If you wanted to convey to the Foreign Office, "We want this done in a steady, measured, rigorous way," those are adjectives you could have used, but instead, the direct, written pressure—you do not need to worry about what I thought at the time as a non-official—was, "Get this done, and get it done before inauguration."

If No. 10 had wanted to say, "subject to the successful achievement of developed vetting status", they could have done so. That then, I am afraid, to me is consonant with a press notice that says, "Peter Mandelson will arrive at post early in the new year". Again, it would be perfectly possible to add a note to editors that says, "subject, of course, to the appropriate security clearance being granted".

Civil servants have many faults but, back to the Chair's original point, records, written communications and formality are important in the culture I have grown up in. The clear written record is not, "Please get this done, subject to—"; it is, "Please get this done."

**Q632 Abtisam Mohamed:** In the previous meeting we had when you came to the Committee, I asked you about timescales. I asked you whether there was sufficient time. You did not relay this information at that meeting; you



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actually said that there was sufficient time. The transcript says, in terms of the process, "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." That kind of contradicts the information you are giving there.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** With respect, I don't think it does. The DV process—about which more column inches have been written in the last few days than, I think, in the entirety of the rest of its existence—is an extremely intrusive and rigorous process. What we ensured, of our own volition, but responding to the atmosphere I have described, is that we used one of the tickets that the Foreign Office has per year to ask UKSV to do it quickly—not to a different standard but do it quickly. That is what they did. So by the time the assessment came to me, I was confident that the process had been undertaken in the usual way, but that—it is a crude analogy—Mandelson's case had been put at the top of the queue, rather than waiting its turn. When I briefed the Committee on 3 November, I was able to say that the process had been followed in the usual way and we did not feel that we were rushed, because we had rushed UKSV to get us the full rigorous work that they do, but ahead of the rest of the queue.

Q633 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Going back to when you said that the decision had been borderline and denied, were you not told that it was denied at any point on the 28th, when the decision was made?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** This is one of the most important misunderstandings. UKSV do not deny clearance in the Foreign Office. They make findings, and they make a recommendation. I was told that the recommendation was that they "leant against" and it was a borderline case. That is the conversation I relayed to the Committee. They do not deny clearance. The Foreign Office grants or denies clearance on the basis of a hugely experienced and capable personnel security team, which responds to the fact that the Foreign Office is under more threat than the whole of the rest of Government put together.

Q634 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Okay. Just in relation to the final decision that you made, you referenced in your response to Aphra that you would not have made a different decision. Do you often think about the consequences of the decision that you made?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I have had plenty of opportunity over the last few days to reflect on that, and I think about the consequences of it right now, I am afraid, for my wonderful family, and the fact that I don't seem to be able to sleep in my own home—and various other things. But I don't reflect negatively on the professionalism or the judgments of my colleagues or, I hope, myself.

Q635 **Abtisam Mohamed:** You also referenced that a bunch of professionals explained the risks. Who were those professionals?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Of course, I do not speak for the Foreign Office today, but the way the Foreign Office was organised at the time—there has been a slight reorganisation since—is that we had an estates, security



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and network directorate, which, broadly speaking, was buildings and security. Within that directorate is a security department, which focuses on all the range of security risks that the Foreign Office faces to assets, material and people, and within that there is a personnel security team. It is that personnel security team, as laid out in internal guidance, that will assess the report from UKSV and, normally, will take the decision themselves on whether to grant or deny. Occasionally, that gets escalated up the line, and in this case, as I have made clear, it came to me for a sense check at the end.

Q636 **Chair:** Do you mind if I interrupt, because I am still thinking about “leaning against” versus “clearance denied or withdrawn”. If you had been shown the documents where the boxes had been ticked as “high concern” and “clearance denied or withdrawn”, would you have changed your mind and decided, actually, that UKSV was not saying that this was a borderline case and that they were leaning against it, but instead that they had high concern, and “clearance denied or withdrawn” was the box that had been ticked?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Completely understandably, Chair, everybody is focused on the form, but the way I recall it—

Q637 **Chair:** I’m sorry. There is so little paperwork in relation to this, forgive us for relying on the little bit that we’ve got.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Forgive me, that certainly wasn’t a criticism of the Committee. I am just frustrated that the way in which it was described to me, and which, on a normal human being level, I would expect, was to some extent a dialogue between extremely experienced security professionals in UKSV and the Foreign Office’s personnel security team, who speak many, many times a day. The way I recall the conversation on 29 January was that they had debated some of the assessments that UKSV had made about specific risks, and as that had been reviewed internally in UKSV, some of those had shifted up and down a bit, and then the Foreign Office had reached its assessment and briefed me.

I can understand why we are all focused on the starkness of the form today, albeit a form that I have never seen. But the conversation, as briefed to me, was a dialogue between the two in which, clearly—and I am not trying to pretend otherwise—there was unease in UKSV, and the Foreign Office had to work out whether it could manage and mitigate that unease.

Q638 **Chair:** I will try one more time. It does seem to me, and I don’t think I am alone, that there is a difference between “leaning against” and “borderline”, and “clearance denied or withdrawn” and “high concern”. You did not see the form. Somebody who is highly intelligent, very professional, terribly experienced—as are you—does a readout of this and does not say, according to you, “high concern” or “clearance denied or withdrawn” but says something different. You accept it is different, don’t you? Do you accept that “leaning against” and “borderline” is different to “clearance denied or withdrawn” or “this person is a high concern”?



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**Sir Oliver Robbins:** It's a form designed for UKSV's role across Government. What I've tried to explain—and forgive me if I've not done so properly—is that, in the case of the Foreign Office and some other Departments, it's not denied or withdrawn. It's a recommendation. We are not unique in that, and Defence is an obvious example.

**Chair:** I know; you have told us this.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** What matters behind the recommendation are the individual findings about the different risks. That is what I was briefed upon, and the way in which those risks could be mitigated.

Q639 **Abtisam Mohamed:** I have a few more questions. It has been reported in the media that you have been relying on section 3 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act as your reason why Ministers could not know the reasoning behind your decision. Is that correct?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** National security vetting is not a system set up by statute, but I've read some of that commentary myself, of course. I think what those voices and commentators are trying to point out is that, in that piece of legislation, Parliament is implying that national security vetting is in a different category, in terms of the management of the civil service, from all of the other things that CRAG—perfectly properly—gave the Executive, gave Ministers, complete authority over. Honestly, I do not recall sitting and thinking, "Aha! I will not tell anyone anything because CRAG tells me not to." What I know is that, having grown up in this system over many years and having, of course, discussed these heavy responsibilities with my predecessors and other permanent secretaries, as well as having read the internal guidance about the extent to which one should share the information about UKSV findings and reports with others, I made what I hope are still a set of defensible decisions about sharing—as Ministers have said to the House—only the final outcome of the vetting process.

Q640 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Did you get legal advice from lawyers at any point?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I did not need legal advice. This is set out in guidance. It's set out in Parliament. The way in which the system works is that Ministers are held entirely independent. Well, to quote Stephen Doughty, "the national security vetting process is rightly independent of Ministers who are not informed of any findings other than the final outcome." He said that on 16 September. It's a piece of briefing that we shared with the Cabinet Office and No. 10, and they approved it explicitly. Indeed, my recollection is that No. 10 asked me to ensure, in the way that we briefed both the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers, that we made clear that Ministers and No. 10 were held completely removed from the vetting process. And so we did, because it is true.

Q641 **Abtisam Mohamed:** As you have said, this is not ordinary—it is exceptional. Given the scale of the decision, did you not think at any point that you would need legal advice to perhaps protect you, going forward?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** It has crossed my mind in the last few days that it would have been quite nice if I had sent such an email and got such a



response. The point I am trying to make, without labouring it, is that this is such an established part of the way that we operate this system. I at no point sat there and thought, "This is a really tricky one. I need to ask a lawyer." We had briefed Ministers; Ministers accepted that position. The way in which the internal guidance is written is absolutely clear about the strict confidentiality of the box within which the vetting system operates. I did not think that I should take it upon myself to do something that I felt—and still feel passionately today, as I hope you can tell—risks the erosion of a really important plank of the Government's defences against what I know very well are a set of absolutely aggressive, hostile powers who are trying to suborn the Foreign Office, its people and its information. Sadly, I can no longer help the Government deal with those, but I know them very well.

**Q642 Uma Kumaran:** Sir Oliver, you said you are proud that you didn't bow to pressure, but of course you were our chief Brexit negotiator. You are very used to high-pressure situations, which is partly why you found yourself in one of the top civil service roles in the country. In one of your earlier answers, you said that you were told not to tell the Foreign Secretary about something. Would you not have exercised your judgment, as a very senior civil servant, that perhaps there is a time, sometimes, when you should be telling the Foreign Secretary or the Prime Minister something that is of concern, perhaps to do with matters of national security?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Absolutely. I was principal private secretary to Tony Blair. I ran Gordon Brown's office. I was deputy national security adviser to David Cameron. I was Brexit negotiator, as you rightly remind me—although I don't have a doctor's note today to allow me to talk about Brexit—for Theresa May. I have worked with the people who have the hardest jobs in the land for most of my career. And of course you are absolutely right: in those sorts of jobs, and as PUS at the Foreign Office, you make fine judgments every day about what to take upon yourself and what burdens to share with the Secretary of State.

One of the things I will deeply miss about this job, if I may say so, is that the Foreign Office is slightly unusual in that, given the risks to Foreign Office personnel around the world, rather more of that burden rests culturally on the permanent under-secretary than in other Departments I have worked in. I felt deeply, deeply responsible for the safety of my team in Tehran. I would check in with them twice a day. I would ask for advice on how they were doing. I am still deeply concerned about the brave, amazing Iranian colleagues we have left behind in Tehran, who work for the British embassy there. I can't shake that off, as you can tell. Those responsibilities weigh very, very heavily on me.

Of course, where it is appropriate, I bring the Secretary of State into the circle of knowledge about how I am tackling those responsibilities and what I think is the right thing to do about them. Safety of staff overseas is a good example, if you don't mind the slight digression. I hope, if the Foreign Secretary were here, she would say we operated this system absolutely strictly. The decisions about whether to bring people home were for me. I was the employer. I would have to defend myself in court if I



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made those decisions wrong and aggrieved families wanted to take the Foreign Office to court. But it was absolutely right for me to let the Foreign Secretary know that we were going to be temporarily drawing down staff from x place or y place. She needed to defend it in Parliament, and I understood that.

This is different. The vetting system explicitly—in *Hansard*, in guidance—is different. I have always understood it that way, and I think it is for very, very good practical reasons that keep the people of this country safe.

**Q643 Uma Kumaran:** Understood. Sir Olly, before the decision or judgment was made not to inform the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary or, it seems, anyone that Mandelson's developed vetting clearance was denied, or the recommendation was that it was denied—you are disputing that version of events, but we have seen the boxes with both ticks in red—did you or officials working for you establish whether there was any precedent for a Prime Minister being informed that a senior civil servant had failed vetting?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't—I know of no precedent. Prime Ministers and other Ministers are perfectly entitled to know that people have failed vetting. As Minister Doughty said to the Commons on 16 September, it is absolutely appropriate for the outcome—the final outcome—of a vetting process to be made clear to Ministers. What I think David Lammy, William Hague and indeed any other Minister that I have come across will tell you is that there is not an ongoing dialogue. Senior officials don't pop upstairs into the Foreign Secretary's office and say, "This one's a tricky one." You don't do it because the minute you do, what that does is it erodes the very principle of the system. You don't have to trust me on this. The Government's documentation to candidates for vetting is on gov.uk: "The information you provide to us is regarded as 'vetting in confidence' and is only known to the vetting staff in UKSV dealing with the clearance and the personnel security team, who make a decision on the clearance."

**Q644 Uma Kumaran:** I am not asking about its contents. This is the most sensitive diplomatic appointment in the British Government. We have seen a form where both boxes were for denied. Did you not think to check whether there was a precedent, where someone has been denied, to then inform the Foreign Secretary or the Prime Minister?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am sorry to harp on: Peter Mandelson was not denied vetting.

**Uma Kumaran:** The recommendation was—

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** The UKSV report, in the case of the Foreign Office and half a dozen other Departments, makes a recommendation on the basis of findings. That is then assessed and a decision is made by the Department, by a capable, experienced and expert team. I did not think that I had better go and find out whether people who have had some particular risks highlighted in a UKSV report have then had that information shared with the Prime Minister or any other Minister, because



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to do so would immediately have opened up the box of the vetting system, which I hold to, to this hour, is an important part of our national defences.

**Q645 Uma Kumaran:** Let me pivot a slightly different way. On the form that we have seen—that you say you have not previously seen—both boxes were red where it is “high concern” and “clearance denied or withdrawn”. You are saying that is not a failure of vetting—related but separate. Once Bloomberg had some emails disclosed to them, and the Prime Minister was going forward at Prime Minister’s questions, did you not think it was worth revisiting the UKSV document or having those discussions, and/or did you ever have any discussions about withdrawing security clearance, now that new information had come to light?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** On the second part of your question, it did not arise, honestly. With Mandelson having been sacked with immediate effect from his post in Washington, his access to classified information was withdrawn immediately. Although, as you will know from the public documents, it took some days, or even a couple of weeks, for him to leave the Government’s payroll, the national security risk he could in theory have posed was eliminated immediately. Sorry, what was the first part of your question again?

**Q646 Uma Kumaran:** It was about when the cache of emails that Bloomberg had come to light. This is a question about judgment. I asked you about this last time, from the transcript. Sir Chris Wormald told us in answer to some of these questions that the due diligence has two parts. There is identification of information and then there is judgment. You knew that the Prime Minister was set to stand at the Dispatch Box and vouch for one of your members of staff. You were rightly concerned about your staff’s reputation, but my question to you at that time was: were you not worried about the Prime Minister being misled and misleading the House, given that you had not told him the full picture?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I hope I have explained that I don’t think it would have been proper for me to expose what you call the full picture to the Prime Minister. I don’t think I had an obligation to do that. I believe very strongly that I had an obligation not to do that. What I do remember distinctly is in the immediate aftermath of his sacking as the Prime Minister’s nominee to Washington, I did consider asking for the UKSV underlying documentation. That was discussed on my behalf with the Cabinet Office, who initially said that I needed a national security justification for reading that documentation. That is completely consistent with my understanding of the system.

**Q647 Chair:** I am sorry to sound like a broken record. Is there a record of this conversation?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am afraid you will have to ask the Department. The point I am trying to make is that then—

**Q648 Chair:** Is there a record of you asking? You would have thought about this and thought, “I think I should look into this. I’m going to make this request, and these are the reasons why I’m going to make this request.”



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Did you make a note of that?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Personally, I don't remember doing so. I am sure there will evidence you could take that will stand that up. The thing I am trying to get to is that actually the Cabinet Office's response made sense to me. This is a hermetically sealed box. Just because it is convenient to you, as permanent under-secretary, or reputationally timely to review this documentation, that does not mean you should do so.

I think they changed their view later, and I also respect the reasons they might have changed their view. There was a lot of dialogue between the Foreign Office and the Cabinet Office as to who precisely owned this risk. What I am saying to you is, yes, it did cross my mind, but I wasn't surprised at the immediate reaction.

Q649 **Uma Kumaran:** There is an on-the-record instance of a Prime Minister being told of a senior official having their security clearance withdrawn. The Prime Minister of the day was Margaret Thatcher, and she made a written statement to the House of Commons in 1987, setting out the withdrawal of security clearance of Sir Maurice Oldfield, who was the former head of MI6. His security clearance was withdrawn.

You are talking about the processes and rules as they stand, but how come Margaret Thatcher was able to be told that someone's security clearance had failed, and then it was subsequently withdrawn, but with Peter Mandelson, all the issues arising about his security matters were not considered in that same vein?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am afraid I do, at this stage, need a tiny bit of levity: I was 12, so I don't remember that. I am conscious of the passing of the years, given it was my birthday yesterday, but I was only 12.

The point you are, if I may say so, helpfully making, is that the Prime Minister was, completely appropriately, told the outcome of the process—that is my guess—and she chose to make that public. As I remember it, not from age 12 but from an amateur interest in history, there were some very particular circumstances around that case, and the Prime Minister chose to make that public. But the point is, was the system right to tell Margaret Thatcher that clearance had been withdrawn? I think that is completely consistent with what I have been trying to explain: that was the final outcome of a DV review, and it was withdrawn. The final outcome, as Stephen Doughty said to Parliament, and as Yvette Cooper and I wrote to this Committee, was shared with Ministers.

**Uma Kumaran:** Sir Olly, I will just leave it with this: your version of events—thank you for setting this out—was that it is borderline. The version that we are seeing shows a very clear denial and a recommendation not to go forward. Those two things do not quite match up at the moment.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Sorry, was that a question?

**Uma Kumaran:** It was a statement, but you can answer it.



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**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Well, it might be.

**Chair:** Let's move on to Edward, who I think has a follow-up question.

Q650 **Edward Morello:** I want to link up the questions that Uma has been asking you and something you said earlier, which was that, in relation to Matthew Doyle, you had been ordered by No. 10 not to tell the Foreign Secretary. Then, when you went to the Cabinet Office to seek permission to look at the UKSV report, you were told, "No, you can't do that." I am just wondering if these two examples speak to an atmosphere created by No. 10 of "Don't tell anyone; you're not allowed to tell. Don't go looking for anything you're not allowed to look for. We'll control this. This is being run here." Is that in any way accurate?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** If I can slightly expand your question, obviously the last few days/weeks/months have left me with many reflections on how the system works. While I have been trying to explain it as honestly as I can—with the Chair's words ringing in my ears from the start—that does not necessarily mean I think it works perfectly. There are things about this whole system that, obviously, looking back, if I were suddenly bureaucratic dictator, I would want to change.

I think there is a bit of confusion as to who is ultimately accountable for holding the record of clearance. I think there is a bit of confusion about how Ministers are briefed to speak to the Commons about some of these things. I was worried at various points in this story that the Prime Minister was being given lines to deploy publicly that the Foreign Office had not had a chance to think through and work through with colleagues. That obviously became even sharper on Thursday at about 9 pm.

So there are lots of things about this that I think could be improved, but the way in which I described my own role in this, I hope—all I am trying to say is that I think I tried to operate the system as I understood it, and as I still believe it should be operated, to the best of my ability.

Q651 **Alex Ballinger:** How common is it for you to have these borderline cases with UKSV, where you have to make a judgment call after not-clear recommendations?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I don't know. It is certainly not unheard of, and the disagreement can go in either direction. I think you would hear the same from other departmental permanent secretaries who have this relationship with UKSV. But it is important that I don't know, because as I say, the guidance set centrally on data privacy is that a line manager—let alone the head of the Department—should only be involved in looking at the report of this process in exceptional circumstances, where that is strictly necessary in order to manage and mitigate risk.

In this case, I don't think it is breaching any confidence to say that, as the occupant of our most senior bilateral ambassadorial role, Mandelson's line manager was about to be me, so I needed to be aware of the mitigations that were being proposed and I needed to be an active participant in



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managing them. In other cases—well, in my tenure, there were no other cases like it.

**Q652 Alex Ballinger:** Now that the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister has suspended the ability for the FCDO to do that, what impact do you think that that will have on Department postings and the ability to get people into the right place?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am very worried about that, honestly. I am now, sadly, a sort of informed spectator, but I am worried about that. In my experience, there are very, very good reasons why the diplomatic service is given a degree of expert latitude over these things. The vetting system cannot be entirely one size fits all. The risks that are manageable in the Food Standards Agency are different from the risks that are manageable in our embassy in Beijing. For people to obtain vetting in the Foreign Office, our candidates very often have a broader and deeper range of international contacts and experience than most. International contacts, of course, are an area of focus for the DV process and therefore for an expert personnel security department that can reach an informed view of how risky and significant those contacts are for a candidate for vetting. I was new to the Foreign Office, but I personally could see the justification for that.

**Q653 Alex Ballinger:** So in your view, after this review is conducted, there should be some leeway for the Foreign Office to continue to exercise some judgment over postings—it should not be entirely down to UKSV in the future.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I hope it is fair to say that, among my reflections when I answered Mr Morello on how I would change the system, this is not one aspect of it I would change.

**Q654 Alex Ballinger:** Was Peter Mandelson granted STRAP access to the highest levels of classified information?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I believe he was. The STRAP system, to be honest, I should be even more careful about than I have been about the DV process. As many members of the Committee will know, for very, very good reasons, that is operated entirely independently even of the Department. It was clear to me that he had received STRAP clearance. That offered me a degree of extra reassurance, because what I have just said about the DV process and international contacts, as I understand it, is an even heavier focus of the STRAP process, given that that is really about the protection of our most sensitive intelligence material from hostile foreign actors. But beyond that, I can't tell you very much, because it is a yes or no from the STRAP authorities, not the conversation that I have been describing between UKSV and the Foreign Office.

**Q655 Alex Ballinger:** Would the same concerns that UKSV raised during the DV process have been raised during the STRAP process? Would they have been addressed in any different way?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am not trying to duck your question, but I do not want to give you false information. I think that if you want evidence on



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how the STRAP process works, you should probably ask the Government for it. I certainly remember, at the time we granted DV, that it gave us a degree of extra reassurance to know that the STRAP authorities would have a fresh opportunity to take a view on some of the things that we considered in that process.

Q656 **Alex Ballinger:** Did the intelligence services at any point share any concerns about Peter Mandelson being the appointment as the US ambassador?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I can only speak to my tenure, and the answer to that would be no.

Q657 **Alex Ballinger:** Knowing what we do now about Mandelson's leaking of sensitive Government information during his role as a Cabinet Minister, what steps did you take as the PUS to ensure that, when that became public, there was no further risk to the FCDO, or that it could be mitigated?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Pardon me, but to get the chronology straight, that allegation about Mandelson—again, like all of us, I should probably be careful about that, given that there is a live Metropolitan police investigation—was only made months after he was withdrawn as ambassador. As I have already explained to the Committee, we took all the usual precautions of shutting down access to sensitive material at the point he was withdrawn. That is probably the best answer I can give you.

Q658 **Alex Ballinger:** He obviously had access to all that information for many months. What steps is the Department, or Government generally, taking to ensure none of that is in future passed on?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I do not think I am here to speak for the Foreign Secretary, but if my reading of the newspapers is right, she is looking at that issue herself, so maybe it is best for her to give you evidence on that. All I can say is that, obviously, in the aftermath of his withdrawal, and particularly in the aftermath of this Parliament's Humble Address, all those communications have been looked at in depth.

Q659 **Alex Ballinger:** I have one final question. You were PUS when the press first became aware that Peter Mandelson, in their words, "had failed his security vetting." How do you think that was leaked and what do you think that says about the integrity of the UKSV process?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am deeply concerned about it, honestly. It probably flows from the rest of the evidence I have been giving you this morning. I think this system does not work if candidates do not understand that this is an entirely different category of protection. Losing that—I know it is a cliché, but that trust, once gone, cannot be got back. Thousands of people go through this process. Thousands and thousands of documents and sensitive issues and operations depend upon it.

I am struck and saddened that within days, probably only a small number of days, of the Cabinet Office, for their own reasons, deciding to open that up and to share what they thought they had found and their perceptions of



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it internally with No. 10—I am not making accusations at anybody. It is not my business to do so. I hope that they are being very rigorously investigated and that prosecutions will result, because this is a grievous breach of national security.

Q660 **Alex Ballinger:** So you believe that it was after the Cabinet Office and No. 10 had access to those documents that the press was made aware of these detailed national security vetting procedures.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I have not seen the advice that went to the Prime Minister. I am not an investigator; all I am able to do is put two and two together, which is that the first I heard of this deep concern and briefing of it to the Prime Minister was only really hours before it appeared in *The Guardian*.

Q661 **Fleur Anderson:** I have questions about three different aspects of the process. Going back to the very beginning, before you started, there were conversations between Peter Mandelson and No. 10. Yesterday, the Prime Minister said: "It was then clear to me that Peter Mandelson's answers to my staff in the due diligence exercise"—before you started—"were not truthful, and I sacked him." That sounds like it was Morgan McSweeney. But when you came into the office, did you have notes of any interview that Morgan McSweeney had held with Peter Mandelson as a part of the due diligence, or even the pre-due diligence, when talking about appointing him? Did you see notes of this interview that may have given you concerns that could then have influenced how you saw the vetting process continue?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** No.

Q662 **Fleur Anderson:** You did not know about any of those conversations.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I knew that there had been an appointment process of sorts, and that No. 10 had operated that with the Cabinet Office. But to be honest, I think I first heard the words "due diligence report" after he was withdrawn as ambassador.

Q663 **Fleur Anderson:** My second question is about the meeting that you held on 29 January about the vetting. Did you hold that meeting because it was flagged that Peter Mandelson had not passed? If it was a clear pass—a green tick box in the form that you did not see—would you have even held that meeting or did you hold the meeting because it was an ambassadorial appointment to Washington and it was Peter Mandelson?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I was asked for that meeting because I think it was a borderline case and a particularly prominent and significant borderline case on which perfectly properly and very sensibly the director felt that he wanted to check his reasoning and make sure that I was comfortable with it.

Q664 **Chair:** And is there a note to the effect that the decision was made that you should have a meeting because these issues were going to come up?



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**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Not to my knowledge. The director of ESND was one of the most important figures in the way that I was learning how to run the Department. I had spent a lot of time with Ian already because of the heavy responsibilities that I was learning that I held as being accountable overall for security. Ian was in and out of my private office regularly, and I was pleased about that. He—I think—said to my private office, “I need 10 minutes with Olly tomorrow or the day after in order to take him through a particular case.”

Q665 **Chair:** “A particular case”—not the particular case that you have been rung up every day by No. 10 to ask about?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am sorry, but this is second hand. I am trying to help you by guessing what the conversation might have been.

Q666 **Chair:** Okay. That is unfortunate, because had a note been made of the decision to put into the diary a meeting that was going to take place for particular purposes or reasons, we would not need to guess at the reasons for it, and Fleur would be able to get fuller answers to the questions that she is asking.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Although I should say again—apologies, Chair—that none of the issues that underly the conversation that we have been having this morning could have been committed to our IT system. For all I know, my diary will say that there was an appointment with the director of ESND, but the office were not allowed—it would have been a serious breach for them—to try to explain, in that appointment in my calendar, what the underlying questions were.

Q667 **Chair:** But you can make notes to your private office, can’t you, about what you are doing and why?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** What was done, I think entirely appropriately, was that the decision was recorded the next day.

Q668 **Fleur Anderson:** I think what we are getting to here is that, while the Prime Minister was told that the process was just carried out and it was passed, actually there were different layers to this process than normally happened, because of the borderline case that you described.

The meeting was held because of the borderline case. You already said, in your evidence to us in November, that one of the hardest parts of this was the Global Counsel shares, which must have been part of the mitigations, therefore. Did you hold follow-up meetings about the Global Counsel shares, and how that was going, at which the borderline case could, then, still have gone either way, if the mitigations that you were satisfied could have been carried out were not carried out?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I had many discussions with Mandelson about his Global Counsel stake and how we manage it—not just the shares but the relationships that he would have built up as chairman of Global Counsel, and founder. We had a mitigation strategy in place for dealing with those.



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The main prism through which I saw that was managing conflicts of interest, which is not, strictly speaking, a national security issue—I suppose that, in extremis, it could turn into one. It was more about protecting, I suppose, Mandelson's reputation, and potentially the Government and the Foreign Office's reputation against any perception that he was advantaging Global Counsel or its clients. That was the dialogue I had with him, starting, I think, a couple of days after his DV clearance was given.

Conflict of interest management, as I may have said to the Committee when we talked about this back in November, is an iterative process. It would be a serious mistake to say, "All conflicts are managed—tick. Let's forget about it." You have to actively manage them, so we kept coming back to it. Also, in order to give me greater confidence, with his permission, I briefed his office and his senior team in Washington to help me keep an eye on any perceptions of conflict, as his term as ambassador advanced.

**Q669 Fleur Anderson:** When ambassadors are appointed, it is normal that they have been through the process—this is a separate issue. I understand that they would have been through developed vetting as a normal part of their appointment before that. But in those cases, is it usual to have a series of mitigations, and to then be working through the mitigations? Is that normal in other circumstances, or is this very unusual?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I hope this is not in itself a breach, but I was revising for myself the Department's own internal guidance on this, which is available to anyone going through the vetting process. What it says is: "Where we do find a risk, we always try to manage it through our aftercare programme or risk mitigation." That is standard process for all applicants and holders of DV. The process I am describing to you was not some special one we invented for Mandelson; it is a completely standard part of the consideration of granting DV.

**Q670 Fleur Anderson:** My final question is about the most recent part of the process, and those times and moments that the Prime Minister talked about—those moments when he felt that he should have been told more before going to the House of Commons for Prime Minister's questions and other things. I am thinking about the unusual parts of the process—not the internal parts of the security vetting that should rightly be kept secret, but the outcome of that vetting, and the fact that it was not a straightforward process.

First, when you had the vetting process advice in January 2025; secondly, when Mandelson was sacked in September and the Prime Minister gave a statement to Parliament and there were press comments that Mandelson had failed his vetting, and there began to be heavy pressure on what had actually happened in the process. Thirdly and fourthly, when you appeared before us in November and you wrote to the Chair of the Committee. Fifthly, there was PMQs and the Humble Address debate on 4 February. Sixthly, the response to the Humble Address debate on 16 March. Every single time, it was either the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister or



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another Minister making a statement and who had to stand up in front of the House of Commons and other places to justify the process going on.

Was it your same decision every time that the due process had been followed and that was the only thing that should be disclosed, or did you receive advice during that time from security specialists or proprietary specialists—we have already talked about legal advice—that the decision to withhold the information about the vetting outcome should remain the same? Did it change through that time? Did you receive further advice?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** That is a great question. Do you mind a slightly long answer? Because there is a lot here. I am not, I'm afraid—not least because my memory is not good enough—going to go through all of those six instances. The fundamental here is that we prepared the joint letter that the Foreign Secretary and I sent to the Chair back on 16 September and, in parallel, Stephen Doughty's briefing for his appearance in the House of Commons the same day, to take one example, we prepared all of that not just in consultation with the Cabinet Office and No. 10, but, as I recall it, with No. 10 telling us that we needed to make it definitively clear that Ministers and No. 10 were not involved in the vetting process in any way. That is not designed to be outrageous to me; that was exactly what I expected. That was exactly the basis on which I had been operating the process since I was appointed permanent under-secretary, and is consistent, I hope, with my evidence both in November and to you today.

As we then worked to satisfy the need of Parliament and of this Committee for as much as we could safely give, we always had that in the back of our minds. We had it, I thought, with the confidence of knowing that that was understood to be the position between us Ministers and No. 10. It should not, I hope, then come as a surprise to think that, at each of these junctures—one scapegoat for this is enough, but I remember there being not a single dissenting voice among my senior team, security team and personnel team that we were taking exactly the right approach. I certainly don't remember being challenged about it by Ministers.

Q671 **Fleur Anderson:** So there was no indication that you should seek legal advice, as has subsequently been done, and be able to give to the Prime Minister? It was not the whole truth that Peter Mandelson had just passed the vetting process. The whole truth was that there were concerns along the way—you could not reveal any of them, but there were concerns that were looked into and then he passed his vetting. There was no consideration that that could have been a more full, complete version of events.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** There was nothing unique about that situation, if I may say so. As I've tried to explain, DV is a risk judgment. DV depends then, quite often, on the management and mitigation of those risks. The internal guidance I read out to you earlier is absolutely clear about that. The objective of the system is not to discover things about people and trip them up; it is to encourage the applicant to be open and make full and frank disclosure of potential vulnerabilities, and then, if possible, find ways of managing them. If we turn DV into a pass/fail piety test, we end up



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robbing the British state of a lot of very capable people with complicated lives and potential vulnerabilities. I really, really don't want that, for the sake of this country. If anything, this Government need to be served by an ever-increasing range of people with broad experience and interesting lives, not suddenly finding that the only people that we can employ in sensitive roles are ones who raise no issues whatsoever.

Q672 **Chair:** There is interesting and interesting, Sir Olly. There is interesting, and there is Peter Mandelson's life and the threats that he may have had to the British state. That is really the nub of this: how on earth did this happen?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Of the things that you might say are interesting—sorry, I can't quite shake 20 years in Whitehall—I would contend that they were very well known, and they were very well known at the point at which the Cabinet Office produced pre-appointment due diligence work for the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister settled on his nominee, he recommended it to the King, he announced it to the public, and then he asked the US Government for agrément to his nominee as ambassador to Washington. I could agree with you, but I do not think there is a big surprise in the fact that Peter Mandelson had an interesting life. What I say to you, still, is that DV is for a different purpose. It is to establish vulnerabilities that lead to an unmanageable risk to UK national security. That is the process, I hope, that we undertook in good faith.

Q673 **Chair:** But you see this doesn't stack up, does it? In the end, he lost his job because he was a threat. That should have been revealed with the DV. He was leaking secrets from the British state to a foreign bank during a time of an economic crash. That is pretty serious. Somebody must have known about that. Some spook somewhere knew that. That is what DV is supposed to be about, isn't it?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** That was not known at the time of his withdrawal, to my knowledge. Certainly, it was not publicly known. It was not known in records available to me or others in the Foreign Office. What was known was that the basis on which the Prime Minister thought he had received assurances from Mandelson about those connections from his past life with Epstein—the Prime Minister can speak for himself, but I remember him visibly angry that, in his view, he had been deceived about those connections. That was the point at which he required of me to withdraw Mandelson from Washington. It was a very difficult day of my professional life, but I think the Prime Minister did the right thing.

Q674 **Edward Morello:** To that point, the Prime Minister in his statement yesterday to the House, said: "Let me be very clear: the recommendation in the Peter Mandelson case could and should have been shared with me before he took up his post. Let me make a second point: if I had known before Peter Mandelson took up his post that the UKSV recommendation was that developed vetting clearance should be denied, I would not have gone ahead with the appointment."

That cannot be accurate, given that he was effectively on his way to Washington at the point at which you were making a decision on whether



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or not the recommendation of UKSV could be mitigated. They had already made the announcement by then. They had already done the due diligence, and the Prime Minister had supposedly seen the summary of the report of the due diligence in your conversations with him. The Prime Minister's statement yesterday is inconsistent with the evidence that you have given today. Do you have a view on whether or not his statement was accurate yesterday?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I am not here to attack the Prime Minister, Mr Morello. I am here to help the Committee. What I want to say to you is that, given the emphasis—rightly—in this session on record-keeping, and given that I was not in post at the time, I can only go on the record. All I would observe is that I do not doubt that the Prime Minister is saying that sincerely. It would be nice if the record showed that he had required his office and his team to make that stipulation more explicitly clear to those of us who were then charged with trying to make this happen.

Q675 **Edward Morello:** But they had already made the decision to push ahead in the absence of the UKSV having completed its process. The idea that you can say, "I wouldn't have done it if I'd known the results of the UKSV," while at the same time imposing a process in which the UKSV could never have been completed in time for him to take up that post—those two things cannot both be true.

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I see what you're driving at, Mr Morello, but I will focus on the chronology for a second. In many ways, to a diplomat, one of the most significant steps in this process was pushing the US Administration for agrément. I am sorry that it is such a pompous phrase, but that is important in the world of diplomacy. In that narrow sense, you are right that we, on the Government's behalf, were pushing for the Prime Minister's nominee to receive agrément before the UKSV process—let alone final clearance—had been given, but we did not deploy him to Washington and grant him a contract until he had obtained vetting. The bit of this process, I would say, that the Foreign Office absolutely could and did control, and this stems from the stance my predecessor took as well, is that he could only serve as ambassador in Washington if he had an extant DV clearance, and that was obtained in time.

Q676 **Alan Gemmell:** Thank you for your time today, Sir Olly. I want to take us to the last couple of days and weeks. The Cabinet Office obtained the vetting file on 25 March. Had you been resisting sharing that, or been part of some push to stop the Prime Minister from seeing relevant information, potentially as part of some cover up?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I should say, before I go any further, it is nice of the Committee to keep thanking me for my time. My diary is wide open!  
[Laughter.]

On the point you make, which obviously—sorry for the levity—is a very serious point, we were having these debates between Cabinet Office, Foreign Office and other Departments as well—though they should speak for themselves—in the aftermath of the Humble Address. The wording of the Humble Address motion is honestly a bit inconclusive about exactly



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what Parliament wanted of the Government in connection with vetting. Vetting is raised, but in a rather oddly specific context, I can say now, as a non-official. So there was a live conversation involving us, Cabinet Office and others, about what that scope really meant and how we might satisfy it.

I would not resile for a second from the Foreign Office's position in that conversation—I am not trying to hide from it; I certainly hold this view, but was also advised it was the correct view; others in the Foreign Office took it too; and we were not alone in Whitehall in taking this position—that, for all the reasons I have gone on about this morning, to open that box is to do something that has long-term, damaging and chilling implications for UK national security. I will not hide from the fact that my Department, including me, took that view in those internal discussions.

But you said "didn't want to share"—we did not own the material. This was a debate about whether the Cabinet Office opened their own safe. In the end, they chose to do so. I would still have wished that they didn't, not because of what has happened to me, but because of all the factors I have tried to lay out for you this morning, and consistently we continued to advise that they shouldn't. I think at various points in this story, though of course they will speak for themselves, they were quite convinced by that view. I certainly recall being debriefed on meetings with the Cabinet Office in which they had been very worried about the implications of opening the box. Indeed, I think—again, they will speak for themselves—they had discussed some of that openly with the ISC as part of the Humble Address follow-up.

I am not putting words in your mouth, Mr Gemmell, but this was certainly not a question of Cabinet Office having one firm view, "Sunshine is the best, blah de blah", Foreign Office says, "Absolutely not, because we own the file and we are terribly secretive about it". They own the file. We thought the Government and national security was best protected by trying to stick to the principles that I have described to you this morning. That was not just my personal view, but that was the strong view of my senior team.

**Q677 Alan Gemmell:** Yesterday in the House, the Prime Minister said that "officials in the Foreign Office saw fit to withhold information" on Mandelson's vetting "from the most senior Ministers in our system". Is that how you see it?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** No.

**Q678 Alan Gemmell:** Once the problem that No. 10 had identified became apparent, what conversations did you have with the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary or the Cabinet Secretary that you would be able to share with us today?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Do you mean in the last few days?

**Q679 Alan Gemmell:** Yes, in the last few days.



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**Sir Oliver Robbins:** This is where I have to plead one of the caveats from my letter if I may, Mr Gemmell. I think given the way I have been treated over the last few days, I have been thinking very hard about this session and how I, I hope, do my duty to Parliament in thinking these issues through. I have not yet really had a chance to focus on the letter I received yesterday and what on earth I do about it. All I would say is that I regret that, in my view, I did not have some of the points that the Prime Minister and others are making about the Foreign Office's decision making and about my accountability. I regret that those were not put to me before I received a letter dismissing me.

Q680 **Alan Gemmell:** In those conversations, were you able to set out how the Foreign Office does vetting? Do you think people understood these distinctions that you have been making today?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I certainly tried to set them out—but I am straying too far. What I have tried to offer you and the Committee today, Mr Gemmell, is that I think a lot of the things that have been said about the system over the last couple of days are, to put it kindly, a bit misguided. I know that it is complicated. I know it is full of jargon. It is a vital system for the protection of this country and I hope I have laid it out clearly and honestly.

Q681 **Alan Gemmell:** Do you have concerns about the amount of information we have now shared about our developed vetting system, in relation to what our adversaries know about us?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Yes, I do. It may sound paranoid, but I think that even about the level of disclosure that the Government have offered over the last few days; British national security does not benefit from that, so we have to ask whose does.

Q682 **Alan Gemmell:** You have been at the centre of Government for many years and spent many years of your career promoting and defending our country's national security. With the benefit of hindsight, having heard the Committee's questions today on notes, on seeking advice, on how the Foreign Office took this decision, and on how it ended up putting in place someone who had, in their past, leaked some of the most sensitive secrets that this country has, would you have done anything different in relation to the appointment of Peter Mandelson?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Anything different? That is very sweeping, Mr Gemmell. Clearly, I have tried to be open. There are various aspects of the system that I think could be improved. Maybe I wish I had had the time to offer that as a general view about the way that we operate the system at various points in my tenure. I think, in the way that you generously asked the question, what I reflect on most is that the British state is dissecting itself, to some extent in public, over this. I understand why and this morning I have tried—now as a private citizen—to support that process. I reflect honestly on my wonderful colleagues who are sat in the British embassy in Moscow or in the British embassy in Beijing and are subjected to incredible pressure, and on the way I tried to lead and support them



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during my time as PUS, and of course I find myself wondering who this helps.

**Chair:** We have a couple of questions from people who promised me that they have one question each. I am going to keep them to that.

Q683 **Dan Carden:** You are one of the country's most distinguished civil servants and you have this week been dismissed by the Prime Minister. Can you tell us why? Is it your contention that you have delivered your duty, that you have carried out security vetting in the usual procedural way? What is your reaction to the way that you have been treated this week? What impact will it have on your colleagues?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Thank you for the generous way you asked the question, Mr Carden, but I should be careful here. The very short answer is I don't fully understand the reasons that I am in the position I am in. That is for a separate process for me to try to get to the bottom of. As a human being, I am desperately, desperately sad about it. I loved that job. I love that institution. I was proud to serve this Government and any Government that might follow it. I hope I was doing it to the best of my ability; I was certainly doing it as hard as I possibly could. I had wonderful colleagues, who I miss deeply. The issues that we were dealing with—and that my colleagues are still dealing with—are of profound importance to the success of this Government and the success of the country. It has been the proudest part of my career to lead that institution because of their work, not because of mine. You say kind things about my distinguished career; I just feel intensely proud of the people I have led, and I wish them every success and wish I could still be with them.

Q684 **Aphra Brandreth:** Thank you for that answer. Yesterday the Prime Minister was asked by the right hon. Member for New Forest East, "Before sacking Oliver Robbins last week, did the Prime Minister ask him why he overruled the verdict of the security vetters, and if so, what was his explanation?" The Prime Minister replied, "I did ask him, and I did not accept his explanation. That is why I sacked him." Did the Prime Minister ask you, and what about your explanation do you think he did not agree with?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** That is a very legitimate question, Ms Brandreth. The reason I wrote to the Committee ahead of this hearing on this matter is that I am afraid, given I am honestly in unknown territory for me personally about the HR position I am in and what this means for my family, I must remain quiet on that until my advisers have told me what is the appropriate thing to do about it. All I would say, echoing the Chair's opening remarks, is that I hope I have been completely transparent as far as I can be in my understanding of process, guidance and precedent at every stage in this. I wish I had been given more opportunities, given the confusion that clearly exists, to explain the process in more detail.

Q685 **Aphra Brandreth:** But is it fair to say that he did ask you?



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**Sir Oliver Robbins:** I must reserve my position on that, if I may, because I think I will get into a situation where I am saying things to this Committee that I may need to rely on later.

Q686 **Sir John Whittingdale:** The Cabinet Office has been tasked with fulfilling the requirements of the Humble Address. Are you confident that that is being fulfilled to the letter, or are you aware of any other documents that have not yet been published that might help explain what has happened?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Obviously, my team was closely involved with the Cabinet Office in trying to satisfy the terms of the Humble Address over the last couple of months of my tenure in the job. Maybe now I am released I can be slightly more open about this: it is a very hard motion to sensibly satisfy, if I may say so to you as Members of the House of Commons. At its extreme, its wording, which requires us to offer up all electronic communications between Mandelson and pretty much anyone in the Government system, could be anything from an intelligence report to a room booking.

What we have been working through for the last couple of months is how on earth to interpret that in a way that satisfies the underlying, clearly legitimate—the Government voted for it—desire of Parliament to understand more about the circumstances surrounding Mandelson while not creating an unmanageable burden, and frankly unmanageable national security risk, for the operation of our diplomatic service. I don't think today, sadly, it is for me to explain how the Foreign Office is working with the Cabinet Office to try to manage that, but I hope it helps my colleagues, and indeed Ministers, left behind in the system to explain that that was a very difficult thing to work through.

Q687 **Sir John Whittingdale:** But are you aware of any documents that would be highly relevant to this matter that have not been released?

**Sir Oliver Robbins:** Clearly, there are documents related to the terms of the motion that have not yet been released, because the release that has been made so far is, I think, a relatively small proportion of what the Government could choose to release in this process. Obviously, there is the ISC process in respect of international relations and national security, as you will be aware, and I think there is a live dialogue—again, obviously now pleading that I am no longer part of it—between the Cabinet Office, Foreign Office and ISC about how to manage that weight of material.

**Chair:** That's it. Thank you very much. Thank you for coming in and answering our questions. I hope the questions we have asked covered the sorts of questions the public will have wanted answers to, given how important this matter has become. Thank you for your time. If you would not mind, I would like the press and public to remain seated and, if you are able to leave first, we will release the press and public after that. I will now finish the proceedings. Thank you very much.