

Foreign Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 28 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 823-1132

Witnesses

I: Sir Philip Barton GCMG OBE, Former Permanent Under-Secretary, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

II: Morgan McSweeney, Former Downing Street Chief of Staff.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Philip Barton

Chair: This morning, we have another session on the work of the Foreign Office in relation to the appointment of Lord Mandelson. Our first witness is Sir Philip Barton. Thank you for coming.

Sir Philip Barton: You are welcome.

Chair: You have been in front of this Committee a few times now, when you were permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office. It is nice to see you. I imagine that you thought one of the benefits of retirement was that you would not see us again.

Sir Philip Barton: I would like to be able to say, Chair, that it is nice to be back, but I am not sure that that would be entirely honest—I might be accused of misleading you.

Q823 **Chair:** I think the thing to do is to remind you that you are no longer a civil servant. I suppose the first question is, you did have eight months left on your contract before you left, so why did you leave?

Sir Philip Barton: I will be honest and open with you, and I am no longer a civil servant: it was not my choice to leave at that point, Chair, and I would have preferred to see out my tenure. But after what I think was a very successful transition to the Labour team in the FCDO, David Lammy wanted to make a change, and told me that and that he wanted somebody who would lead the Department over the years ahead and carry out a major transformation programme, so I agreed to leave.

Q824 **Chair:** A major transformation programme—

Sir Philip Barton: Of the Department.

Chair: That means what? Does it mean 25% cuts in staff?

Sir Philip Barton: At the time, that was not known, obviously, because there had not been the spending review, but it is not that unusual—just to finish my thoughts on this—for a permanent secretary to change following a change in the party of government, so I agreed to step down in January of last year.

Q825 **Chair:** Okay. I know that you were really only properly involved in the process for the appointment of Peter Mandelson for a very short time—probably, basically, December to mid-January.

Sir Philip Barton: Correct.

Chair: Can I take you back to a few months prior to that? Before Donald Trump was elected President, we have Karen Pierce as the ambassador to the United States. She is a very experienced ambassador, popular with the Biden team and the Trump team. We have an internal candidate who there had been a process for, to get a replacement for Karen Pierce when she stepped down, I believe?



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Sir Philip Barton: As I think is clear from Lord Case's advice to the Prime Minister, revealed in the papers given under the Humble Address, the last Government decided in the first part of 2024 to hold an internal competition to find a replacement for Dame Karen. That individual was recommended at the end of that process, but in the end it was not taken forward, because the general election was called and the appointment process was frozen under the rules that apply on significant decisions during an election period.

Chair: I see. I did not realise it was pre-election.

Sir Philip Barton: It was before the election.

Q826 **Chair:** Okay. Let us go to late summer, early September: what discussions were taking place about an alternative candidate?

Sir Philip Barton: I was not involved in any discussions at that point.

Q827 **Chair:** Right. Two months later, we have Peter Mandelson announced as ambassador to the United States. At what stage were you involved in any decision?

Sir Philip Barton: Good question, Chair. I was first involved when, in mid-December, I was told of the Prime Minister's decision to make a political appointment as ambassador, and that that political appointment was Peter Mandelson. That was when I was first involved. It was, if I recall right, on 15 December, so the beginning of the week that ended with his announcement.

Q828 **Chair:** Okay. From the first tranche of the Humble Address papers, we have seen that between 11 November and 11 December, the Prime Minister's PPS and private secretary for the Foreign Office give advice; we see the then Cabinet Secretary, Sir Simon Case, give his advice; and we see the due diligence carried out by the Cabinet Office—but we do not see advice from you. For members of the public, that might seem surprising. Were you ever asked your opinion about appointing Peter Mandelson as ambassador? You were in charge of the Foreign Office.

Sir Philip Barton: The first I was aware of the decision was when I was told on 15 December. The first I was aware of the advice that had gone to the Prime Minister, or indeed that it was being formulated, was when I read it in the Humble Address released papers. I wasn't involved. I wasn't told a decision was coming.

Q829 **Chair:** Would you have expected that?

Sir Philip Barton: I think two things. One is that, on the face of it, it is reasonable for the head of the Foreign Office to be involved in the thinking around what is our major, top bilateral ambassador post. On the other hand, given clearly that the Prime Minister was deciding to make a political appointment, I think it is also reasonable that civil servants not be directly involved in discussions around what is a political appointment, because in the end that is a matter for elected politicians. I can also see the sensitivity. I am a bit conflicted.



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Clearly, I think ideally, you want to have a situation where there is a tight and small circle of people who can be consulted on a big decision like this, on a basis of trust, but I can also see that, in the end, it was a political matter. I suspect—I have no knowledge of this—that it was discussed in political circles at the top of Government.

Q830 **Chair:** In a circle of trust, do you think you would have a place?

Sir Philip Barton: Not in a political conversation, no. But in the end, this is an appointment to the most senior job in our foreign service. I was the head of the diplomatic service, so I think it is possible, without asking me—or any head of the diplomatic service—as a civil servant, for them to be involved in a conversation around, for example, what the requirements are, what the UK needs in the period ahead, and that sort of thing, even if they are not then involved in the absolute decision-making discussions around individuals who are politicians, because it is a political appointment.

Q831 **Sir John Whittingdale:** I will follow up on one or two of the questions from the Chair. You said that the process had been under way for an internal competition but come the general election it was frozen. Once the new Government had been elected, was the process not then recommenced?

Sir Philip Barton: I wasn't involved, as I say, so I don't know whether that was considered very much. Obviously, you have seen the then Cabinet Secretary's advice on that. All I know about it is that advice.

Q832 **Sir John Whittingdale:** The Foreign Office must have been continuing to look at potential candidates to replace Karen Pierce.

Sir Philip Barton: Karen Pierce had basically been agreed formally, as the notes say, to stay until January 2025. I took the view that actually what made most sense was to know the outcome of both the UK general election and the US presidential election. Obviously, until it was called, there was an uncertainty around the timing of the UK general election, given our political system, with an end point of January 2025. Karen and I had therefore discussed whether, if required, she would be willing to stay a bit longer while we saw how those two elections played out, so that there was flexibility.

To answer your question, in terms of September 2024, that was before we knew the outcome of the US election, and the new UK Government were only just in, so the FCDO and I were not actively looking for candidates at that point. I felt we had time to see the outcome of the US election, and Karen had shown flexibility over exactly when she ended in the beginning part of 2025.

Q833 **Sir John Whittingdale:** When were you first told that it was likely to be a political appointment?

Sir Philip Barton: When I was told of the Prime Minister's decision.

Q834 **Sir John Whittingdale:** On 15 December.



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Sir Philip Barton: Yes.

Q835 **Sir John Whittingdale:** So until 15 December you had no information that any discussion had taken place, and certainly that a decision had been reached.

Sir Philip Barton: No.

Q836 **Sir John Whittingdale:** When you were told that a decision had been reached and it was Peter Mandelson, did you express any concerns about that?

Sir Philip Barton: As I say, I was told of a decision, so I was not asked for advice. I was told a due diligence process had been carried out, and—I think this is known now—that the Prime Minister had been made aware of the risks, had accepted those risks and had decided to proceed. I then moved on to a conversation, or was asked for advice, on the practical steps required to meet the Prime Minister's decision, and then the requirement around the timescale.

Q837 **Sir John Whittingdale:** You say the Prime Minister had been made aware of the risks, but he had not, because the developed vetting had not been carried out, so all that had taken place was the due diligence. Did you ask whether or not developed vetting had taken place?

Sir Philip Barton: It was clear at that point that vetting had not taken place. It was clear to me at that point that the step that had taken place was due diligence, not vetting.

Q838 **Chair:** Can I just ask, do you remember who it was who was telling you these things?

Sir Philip Barton: I had a conversation with a private secretary in No. 10.

Q839 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Did you express a view as to whether or not developed vetting should take place before an announcement?

Sir Philip Barton: On that, later that week as we were taking forward the practical steps required, the Cabinet Office initially said that as Mandelson was—to use the technical phrase from the guidance—a “fit and proper person”, as a member of the House of Lords, he did not require developed vetting. To be honest with you, I thought that was odd and insufficient. I had been deputy ambassador in Washington, and therefore occasionally chargé, and I knew very well that to do the job effectively you have to be party to some of the deepest secrets that the UK Government holds.

But I also recognised that the situation was unusual, and I therefore asked for advice—although I was pretty clear in my own mind—from the FCDO security team. They came back to me after discussions with the Cabinet Office and said that their advice was that he should have DV, and I absolutely agreed with that. By then, the Cabinet Office had reflected further and they also agreed.

If I remember right, that conversation started at the back-end of the week of 16 December, at the time that the public announcement was made. By



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the beginning of the following week, just before Christmas, it was clear that that was going to be the requirement. That is what I had thought, as it were, and I endorsed the advice. At that point, Mandelson was sent the forms that you need to fill in to kick off the whole process.

Q840 **Chair:** We have had a bit of, “He said, she said” on this. We have had the Cabinet Office saying that the Foreign Office asked, “Does he really need DV?” and the Foreign Office saying that the Cabinet Office asked, “Does he really need DV?”. You are down on the Foreign Office’s side that it was the Cabinet Office that said it first.

Sir Philip Barton: I cannot promise you who said what first. I know what I was told: I was told that the Cabinet Office suggested that he did not require DV. Self-evidently, there was clearly some further back and forth and consideration. I do not want to give you the impression that, when we were taking forward the DV, there were people in the centre still saying, “Don’t do that.” By the beginning of the following week, everyone was agreed that he should have DV and, therefore, that it was now about taking that process forward. I have given you my account—my memory—of what I heard and what I thought at the time.

Q841 **Chair:** And one thing is for sure: nobody made a note of it.

Sir Philip Barton: In the end, this was about practical arrangements, rather than things—Chair, I know you have talked in previous hearings about civil servants writing everything down, but I agree with those who have said to the Committee that, actually, if you are going to get work done, you simply cannot and do not have time to record every interaction. The key thing is what was the decision. The decision was that he required DV, and that is recorded.

Q842 **Sir John Whittingdale:** So the decision was that he required DV. That was your view and it was the view of the Foreign Office security department, yet we know that prior to him obtaining DV clearance, he was given access to information that would usually require DV to have been completed. How did that come about?

Sir Philip Barton: You had—I cannot remember whether it was seven or eight pages, but it was certainly lengthy and thorough—a response from the FCDO yesterday. You had sent them a very long list of questions—I do not mean long in a critical way; they were very good questions. I think there are good answers in the FCDO’s response, and I recognise the consideration of the time.

The context I was going to share on this point is that you have a publicly announced ambassador-designate to do the single most important ambassador job for the UK. You have a very, very compressed timescale that you are being asked to meet for them to start their role in Washington. You have the exceptional circumstances of an incoming Trump Administration and a very high premium, therefore, on the new ambassador arriving as well briefed as possible in the short time available, recognising that ambassadors normally have several months to prepare



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for big jobs like this. That required Mandelson to have access to briefings and papers to allow him to be properly prepared.

As reflected in what the Foreign Office said to you in the note last night, a decision was taken—in line with the guidance—that he should be given access to the building and access to the paperwork in particular on, for example, the UK Government's preparations and policies towards an incoming Administration. I was given that advice, and I endorsed it and I signed off on it. I think it was the right thing to do to make sure that, as I say, the Prime Minister's choice for ambassador was properly prepared when he started his job. I think it would have been very odd not to do that.

Q843 Chair: It does look odd though, because he gets a green pass, which means that he has DV. He had a DV pass on the very day that, according to the DV people, he should have been recommended to not get DV. On the day that Olly Robbins is making his decision that it was borderline, Mandelson is wandering around the Foreign Office with a DV pass. There is a photograph of him going into the Foreign Office on that day.

Sir Philip Barton: I do not know the answer on the actual type of pass. It was clear to everybody at the time—I cannot quite remember what the letter from the Foreign Office last night said—that he did not have DV and there were limits to what he could see and be told. Again—I think this is in the letter from last night but I cannot quite remember—I do think there was a process in place to tell people who were going to brief him that there was a certain level of classification that they could go up to in talking to him, and they could not go beyond that, because he did not have DV clearance.

Q844 Sir John Whittingdale: Coming back to the answer you gave the Chair about you leaving your post, you said that David Lammy told you that he wanted to make a change because of the transformation programme. Do you believe that your concerns about the way in which Peter Mandelson was appointed had any influence on the decision to ask you to leave early?

Sir Philip Barton: No, for a simple timing reason. I announced to the Department that I was leaving on 4 November 2024. I did not know anything about Mandelson until the middle of December. The answer is, straightforwardly, no.

Q845 Aphra Brandreth: I want to check something with you. Despite being the head of the diplomatic service, you obviously were not asked by No. 10 or the Prime Minister, directly or indirectly, your view on Peter Mandelson's suitability for the role. Had you been asked, would you have said that you had concerns about the reputational risks that he carried?

Sir Philip Barton: That is genuinely a really hard question to answer. Hindsight is a fantastically wonderful thing and the question is hypothetical, but let me have a go at what I was thinking at the time. First, it is worth repeating that at no point did anyone consult me or ask me. I was presented with a decision and told to get on with it. There was no space for dialogue. You know that.



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It is the most important job we have. I had been deputy ambassador, I knew the US well from 10 years previously, and I worked a lot on the United States throughout my diplomatic career, so I think I had a sense and understanding of US politics. That gave me an idea of what might or might not be a problem further down the track.

There was a part of me that had a concern at the time. I did not know anything that was not in the public domain, and we know now a lot more about Mandelson's links to Epstein, but I was concerned that a man who demonstrably, from the public record at the time—it was clearly much bigger than we all knew—had a link to Epstein, who through both the presidential election campaign in the US and more generally in US politics, had been and was a controversial figure, could become a problem in the future. That was not because I expected that we would find out more; I did not, and who would necessarily know? I just thought that it was a potentially difficult issue, politically, in the United States.

That is a very candid account of probably what I was thinking at the time, but there was no space, avenue or mechanism for me to put that on the table. A decision had been taken and it was a political decision.

Q846 Aphra Brandreth: You mention, of course, the links to Jeffrey Epstein, which were in the media at the time. Did you have concerns about Mandelson's business relationships with China and Russia?

Sir Philip Barton: Please don't laugh, but I really did not follow what Mandelson was up to in his business relationships. I knew about him when he was a Government Minister, so I did not have it right in front of my face, and I did not see the due diligence report or what the details were. I would always believe in a vetting process to look at issues that might affect national security.

Q847 Aphra Brandreth: You know the United States very well from your previous diplomatic role there, and you probably had links with people out there. Were you aware of any views expressed by the President's transitional team about concerns about Mandelson being given that post, or about Dame Karen Pierce being moved on from the post?

Sir Philip Barton: There is quite a lot already in the public domain. There was at least one tweet from someone close to Trump, reminding people of what Mandelson had said many years before about Trump, when he was President previously. Those around Trump felt blindsided by the announcement at short notice, shall we say.

It was clear also that Karen and her team had done an excellent job in establishing relationships and access to President-elect Trump, and when he was a candidate. They were doing their jobs. That is a hard thing to do, particularly in the political climate in the US, while maintaining a good relationship with the current Administration. Trump, again on the record, had said that he liked Karen and worked well with her and would be happy for her to stay. So that is a rather long-winded way of saying yes.

Q848 Chair: On what you were saying earlier about the DV and the access



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point, to be fair to you, this is paragraph 5 of the statement from Ian Collard, where it says, "Lord Mandelson's Private Secretary should, in advance, inform people that he was meeting" that they knew he did not yet have DV clearance.

Sir Philip Barton: Thank you.

Q849 **Richard Foord:** Thank you, Sir Philip, for returning to the Foreign Affairs Committee to give evidence.

The Prime Minister's National Security Adviser, Jonathan Powell, was reflecting last September on the discussions that were had in Government the year before, about Lord Mandelson's appointment. He reflected that you, Sir Philip, had reservations. Can you remember what you were saying to the National Security Adviser about your reservations around appointing Lord Mandelson back in 2024?

Sir Philip Barton: I think it was very much along the lines of what I just said around the possibility of his known connection to Epstein causing an issue subsequently—obviously, I didn't know what was actually going to happen—because Epstein was such a toxic hot potato subject in US politics itself, including in the election campaign. That is what I recall thinking at the time. I can't prove this, because I don't know what Jonathan was thinking when he said it last September, but my instinct is that is what it refers to.

Q850 **Richard Foord:** Thinking about the No. 10 operation, later on that year do you recall any dismissiveness in No. 10 about the importance of vetting and, if so, how was that communicated to you?

Sir Philip Barton: I wouldn't use the word "dismissive". The word I would use is "uninterested". I think people wanted to know that all the practical steps required for Mandelson to arrive in Washington by or around the inauguration date needed to be completed at pace, as it were. That was it—the interest.

To be honest with you, no one said to me, "Look, Philip, the Prime Minister knows there are some risks around this. Can you really, really make sure that the vetting is done rigorously?" I mean, it is always rigorous anyway, but that wasn't the sort of thing being communicated. The sort of thing was, "Fine, he needs vetting. Make sure it's done in time."

Q851 **Richard Foord:** Last week, when Sir Olly gave evidence to the Committee, I said that Sam Coates had reported words around "just approve it". I need to correct the record slightly, because Sam Coates did not actually report that. He did not file a report. He did discuss it with a member of this Committee. He didn't actually put it in writing. It didn't get off the cutting room floor. But it doesn't take away from the fact that Sir Olly's reply made plain that he had a "strong sense that there was an atmosphere of pressure and a certain dismissiveness" about this developed vetting. Could you comment on that atmosphere of pressure as you understood it, in late 2024?



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Sir Philip Barton: Can I just say one thing about the non-reported phone call and the use of a particular word? It is important that I say this.

First, I didn't receive any direct calls from the chief of staff during my time as permanent under-secretary; there was no call at all. My interactions with him were always when others were present, in a general meeting, and there weren't very many of those either.

This story or versions of it has been in the media persistently; floating around the media since last September. There are different versions, sometimes involving a swear word, sometimes not. I have really racked my brains, and I cannot recall Morgan McSweeney swearing in a meeting at me or, indeed, just in general. I do not see any substance in that part of it. I think it is important that I say that this morning, given how many people have come to think that that might be true.

In not answering your question, I have slightly forgotten what your actual question was. I know I did not answer it; I did that on purpose. Can you just give the headline at the end of your question?

Q852 **Richard Foord:** Sir Olly, when replying last week, said that there was "an atmosphere of pressure and a certain dismissiveness about this DV process", and I wondered if you could comment on the atmosphere of pressure.

Sir Philip Barton: Where I would start is that on 18 December, I received a letter from the principal private secretary to the Prime Minister; it is the one released as part of the Humble Address. I did not receive letters from the principal private secretary to the Prime Minister very often—most of my dealings were with the foreign affairs team in No. 10, as you would expect. The letter, as you know, basically says that the Prime Minister has decided. It then goes on to say: please could arrangements be put in place, or words to that effect, for a handover by the inauguration—a very compressed timescale. That, in effect, is the top of the Government saying that the Prime Minister has decided that he wants Mandelson as ambassador, and he wants it done in that timescale. That is what creates the pressure. There were conversations around progress, but no one working on this in the FCDO can have been in any doubt about the urgency of the issue and the importance that No. 10 and the Prime Minister attached to Mandelson being in DC in very short order.

Chair: Can I help you? The letter is there on page 22 of the bundle in front of you.

Sir Philip Barton: Thanks, Chair; I have the letter. It is clear: "Please would you take forward the necessary arrangements at pace. We would like to secure agrément"—the formal agreement of the US Government—

Chair: Read the end of the sentence.

Sir Philip Barton: It is, "as soon as possible to enable a handover in advance of the US inauguration."



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Chair: In advance of the US inauguration.

Sir Philip Barton: Yes, that was the ambition at the start.

Chair: So he is given the job on 20 December, and they want him at the US inauguration on 20 January.

Sir Philip Barton: Correct.

Chair: So you have a month.

Sir Philip Barton: Yes. Sorry, does that answer your question?

Q853 **Richard Foord:** It does, thank you. I have another, which relates to that time in December. I just want to get an idea about some of the events that were happening in December 2024. The Prime Minister gave a speech on 5 December where he talked about the “tepid bath”. To recap, for people not familiar with it, he said that “people in Whitehall are comfortable in the tepid bath of managed decline.” The implication was that the civil service was satisfied to stagnate and was not sufficiently reactive to political direction. I wonder whether that had any influence on the culture and the way in which the civil service was reacting to pressure around this political appointment.

Sir Philip Barton: I honestly don’t think it did, actually. I honestly think that the FCDO, once it was clear that a decision had been taken and had been through the formal sign-off process with His Majesty the King, did what it always does: leant in and did its level best to deliver Ministers’ ambitions—in this case the Prime Minister’s ambition. I think it would have done that whether or not the Prime Minister had made a speech about the civil service earlier in the month. To be honest with you, I think the Foreign Office and all the officials involved in the Cabinet Office and No. 10 all acted, in my view—certainly the ones I was collaborating with—in good faith at the time to try to deliver a very, very ambitious ask in terms of the timescale, because that was the professional thing to do.

Q854 **Richard Foord:** The Prime Minister said at PMQs last week: “No pressure existed whatsoever in relation to this case.” How can that be squared with Sir Olly’s evidence last week, when he said that there was a “strong sense that there was an atmosphere of pressure”?

Sir Philip Barton: I don’t think it is for me to do evidence squaring. Obviously, there are going to be other conversations around this, and I don’t know who may or may not be asked to consider it in more detail. I have to ask you: what do you actually mean by your question? I am not being difficult; the reason I ask you that is that I think there are two possible questions here. Question 1 is: was there pressure on the substance of the DV case? Question 2 is: was there pressure to get the DV case done in a particular timeframe? They are different questions.

Q855 **Chair:** Can you give us two answers?

Sir Philip Barton: I can give you two answers.

Chair: Good.

Sir Philip Barton: I actually wrote down two answers because I think there are two questions there. I think some of the problem is that people are talking past each other because they are actually talking about different things. I can't find my answers, but I will give them to you anyway. Shall I just carry on?

Chair: Carry on.

Sir Philip Barton: Answer 1 is that during my tenure, I was not aware of any pressure on the substance of the Mandelson DV case. On question 2—was there pressure?—absolutely. I have described it. I have also seen what the Foreign Office said to you last night and recognise what is said in that letter about the pressure to get it—that is, DV clearance—done on a particular timescale. As I said to you earlier, I don't think anyone in the Department working on this could have been in any doubt that there was pressure to get everything done as quickly as possible.

Q856 **Richard Foord:** I recognise your distinction between time pressure and pressure on the substance of the vetting process, but it is reasonable to suppose that one can affect the other. If there is time pressure—if there is a desire to get the ambassador out to Washington DC before inauguration—and the FCDO has the delegated power to give a recommendation around developed vetting, you can understand that that might lean on the substance as well as the timing.

Sir Philip Barton: If I recall right, when he was giving evidence to you last week, Sir Olly said that there was pressure on the timescale, but that that did not affect his decision making on the substance of the case. The letter from the FCDO last night says: "He"—that is, the director ESND—"does not assess that this pressure"—the general pressure—"influenced the professional judgment that was reached by himself or his team." To be clear, I believe both of them.

Q857 **Chair:** Even though they didn't manage to read the last page?

Sir Philip Barton: Of what?

Q858 **Chair:** There was a 10-page document for the DV and neither of them seem to have read it. Was that anything to do with the time pressure or any other pressure?

Sir Philip Barton: Sorry, Chair; I am not aware of the details of pieces of paper—

Q859 **Chair:** The boxes.

Sir Philip Barton: I am not aware of the boxes. I have not seen a piece of paper with boxes on it either, ever in my career.

Chair: Nobody seems to have seen them.

Q860 **Aphra Brandreth:** I wanted to ask about the fact that back in September 2024, Lord Case—Simon Case—had written to the Prime Minister advising



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that security vetting should be carried out prior to the appointment of Peter Mandelson. However, the announcement was made on 20 December 2024, and it was not until three days later that security vetting commenced, as we have talked about. I wanted to ask, given the tight timeframe that there was, what process was in place at the time for the order of security vetting and appointment announcement, in your view?

Sir Philip Barton: Sorry, can you unpack slightly what you mean? I am not sure I completely understood.

Q861 **Aphra Brandreth:** What was the normal order of process in place at the time? Would you say that the normal order would be vetting and then announcement, or announcement and then vetting?

Sir Philip Barton: The normal order is vetting and then announcement.

Q862 **Chair:** Do you have any idea why it went the other way around?

Sir Philip Barton: No. The timing of the announcement was driven and decided by No. 10.

Q863 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Following on from colleagues' questions in relation to pressure, what did that look like? Were you receiving regular phone calls?

Sir Philip Barton: I am not going to repeat myself, but it is important to remember the overall framing, in a sense. You have the letter from the principal private secretary—I will not repeat myself, but that provides the overall context. There were meetings in that week with No. 10. There would then have been regular progress chasing. There was discussion around the exact timetable that went on, so there was keen interest all the way through from No. 10 that the practical arrangements required to get Mandelson to Washington in the timescale required or thereabouts were all moving forward, but in a sense, the pressure was kind of set at the beginning and just carried on. It was not a matter of, "Did someone phone every day at 10 o'clock?" It was much more, "This ambitious timetable has been set."

Q864 **Abtisam Mohamed:** You referenced earlier the Cabinet Office's "fit and proper" exemption. You said that you thought that was odd, insufficient and unusual. Did you reference your concerns to No. 10 or to the Cabinet Office?

Sir Philip Barton: I did not need to, to be honest with you, because I asked the FCDO security team for advice. When the advice came back to me, after their conversations with the Cabinet Office, at that point everyone was agreed that he needed DV.

Q865 **Abtisam Mohamed:** A number of emails came out in the Humble Address that were from prior to Mandelson being appointed. Was it normal for No. 10 to be sending emails to prospective candidates?

Sir Philip Barton: No. If I remember right, one of the emails attached conflict of interest forms, which would normally be a departmental matter. It was, in the end, agreed that the conflict of interest should be done by the FCDO. The fact that No. 10 was, at all points, trying to accelerate



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arrangements was a strong signal of the time pressure that everyone was under. They were also trying to play their part. They were stepping in to do things that might in the past have been left to the FCDO.

Q866 Abtisam Mohamed: One of the emails references that you had a discussion with Mandelson. What was that discussion?

Sir Philip Barton: From memory, I had an intro chat with Mandelson on the day—the Friday—that his appointment was announced. That was around practical matters of how the Department would support him in his preparations to be the next ambassador, now that that had been announced.

Q867 Abtisam Mohamed: Again, one of the emails references that an iPad, laptop and iPhone were given to Mandelson. Is it usual practice to give that to somebody who is not yet cleared?

Sir Philip Barton: It is not usual, but it is not unprecedented.

Q868 Abtisam Mohamed: The emails also reference that he had had briefings from senior officials at the FCDO. Were you aware of the content of those briefings?

Sir Philip Barton: I would not have had time, so I was not aware of every bit of it, but I was aware of the subjects that we were choosing to brief him on. There was, as you would expect, a proper, professional process run by the team in charge of our relationship with the United States to give him access particularly to briefing on UK Government policy for the incoming Administration across a range of issues. I remember seeing the list of issues, and I probably looked at it and thought, “Yes, that looks like a sensible list,” but I did not look at the briefing. I would not have expected to do that.

Q869 Abtisam Mohamed: None of the emails makes reference to him being subject to cleared vetting. It is almost as though it was, “He has got the job and we are just going through the process.” Was there anything in any of the documents that said it was all subject to satisfactory DV?

Sir Philip Barton: As far as I recall and am aware, the first time the documentation shows “subject to DV” is when the FCDO sent him what is a standard form of words for people who are going into jobs. I am not aware of any other references in the documentation.

Q870 Abtisam Mohamed: Would you foresee a situation where, if the final DV had been refused, that would have been rejected by the Cabinet Office? I cannot foresee a situation where that could have happened, given how he was treated, and when all the emails have implied that he has the job. Would you have foreseen a situation where it could have been refused?

Sir Philip Barton: Sorry, what do you mean by that? Do you mean, is it a possibility, or—

Abtisam Mohamed: Could it have been a possibility?



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Sir Philip Barton: I think, when you start a vetting process, there has to be a possibility that, at the end of that process, someone is deemed not to meet the standards to have developed national security vetting.

Abtisam Mohamed: Could it have happened in this situation?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not know anything about the substance of the vetting. I am sorry to say this again, repeating what I said earlier, but at the time, I was not following very much about Mandelson's wider life. It is not an impossibility. It would have been a crisis if we had got to the point where he had no vetting clearance. That would have been a crisis, self-evidently—a publicly announced political appointment of the next ambassador to Washington not being able to go. That would have been a big problem.

Q871 **Chair:** But presumably the DV is done with an open mind—it is done with an open mind, whether we do DV, and if you fail it, you are not going to get the job. The question is, really, that there is an email which says that he is going to get briefed in person from 6 January onwards, including on higher tiers—presumably that means the equivalent of the sort of information that you would get if you had DV. He has a pass for people who have DV, but this is before he gets DV. He is on the payroll from 14 January. I mean, it does all look like he has the job already.

Sir Philip Barton: He got the job in the sense that he had been announced by No. 10. The paperwork had gone to His Majesty the King, and he had been announced by No. 10. We were seeking the agreement of the US Government. In that sense, he had got the job.

Q872 **Chair:** What is the point in the DV?

Sir Philip Barton: Because to do the job, as I said—sorry, Chair, I should take the irritation out of my voice; I am not irritated—

Chair: I am irritated.

Sir Philip Barton: To do the job effectively, you have to be able to have access to information that, of its sensitivity, requires DV. That is why he needed DV.

Q873 **Chair:** If he had been failed, he would have had access to the buildings as though he had DV; he would have had access to information as though he had had DV; and he would have failed it, because he would have been seen as a security risk, and you would have exposed yourselves to him as a security risk during the period.

Sir Philip Barton: I do not agree with your characterisation of "as though he had DV"; he had access to the building, but parts of the building where people without DV also have access. He did not have access—

Q874 **Chair:** Why did he have a green pass?

Sir Philip Barton: I am sorry; you will have to ask the Foreign Office about the passes. He did not have access to the parts of the building where you absolutely do require DV. On the paperwork—I think this is in



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the Foreign Office letter—he had access, under the rules. As allowed as a fit and proper person and a Member of the House of Lords, he had access to papers up to a certain level of classification. He did not have general access. He was not able to roam free, if you like, in terms of access to information across the Department.

I can understand why it looks odd. I actually think it was the right thing to do to ensure that, at the time, in the short timescale that had been given, he could arrive in Washington properly prepared. The alternative would have been that we would have had an ambassador to the United States turning up not properly or fully briefed on the Government's policies towards an incoming Administration, and that would not have been right. It would not have been proper for the Foreign Office to operate in that way, so I am comfortable that it was the right decision at that point in time to give him that limited access under the rules.

Q875 **Chair:** Is this a fair way of putting it? Given that he had been offered the job on 20 December, Christmas and New Year are in the way, and he has to be getting to Washington by 20 January, you were doing everything that you could to accommodate him being ready for that date?

Sir Philip Barton: Within the rules.

Q876 **Aphra Brandreth:** Was there a contingency plan in place for what might happen if he were not granted security clearance?

Sir Philip Barton: No.

Q877 **Edward Morello:** Sir Philip, you said that you were informed by the principal private secretary in No. 10 on the 15th.

Sir Philip Barton: On the 18th.

Edward Morello: The 18th.

Sir Philip Barton: Sorry, you used the word "principal". I was informed by "a" private secretary in No. 10 on the 15th.

Q878 **Edward Morello:** So you were informed on the 15th that the Prime Minister wanted to appoint Peter Mandelson?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes.

Q879 **Edward Morello:** Was it a conversation, because there is then subsequently the letter?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes, I was phoned up.

Q880 **Edward Morello:** The letter just references the desire to appoint Peter Mandelson. Your letter to the private secretary to the King says that, "The Prime Minister has indicated his intention to recommend...a small number of political appointments". When you had the conversation on the 15th, that presumably was that the PM will make a number of appointments.

Sir Philip Barton: I cannot recall; I do not think he did. To be honest with you, I think that the first sentence of my letter was a catch-all



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sentence. I think that was how it was described to your colleague in your hearing with Cat Little. It was non-specific. It was a non-specific general catch-all rather than because I was being told that there is more coming.

Q881 **Edward Morello:** Well obviously, in his evidence, Sir Olly Robbins said that he was asked or that another name was floated to him, Matthew Doyle. Not only that, but he was asked to keep that information from the Foreign Secretary. If not during the conversation on the 15th, at any subsequent point, were any other names floated to you for potential political appointees?

Sir Philip Barton: Not by the Labour Government. The first I knew about Matthew Doyle was when Sir Olly gave you evidence.

Q882 **Edward Morello:** In any conversations with No. 10 were you ever asked to withhold information from the Foreign Secretary?

Sir Philip Barton: Ever?

Q883 **Edward Morello:** Well, we should put on record that you have served under four different Prime Ministers. At any point during your tenure as perm sec, were you asked by a No. 10 organisation to withhold information from the Foreign Secretary? How usual is that request?

Sir Philip Barton: I am worried that everyone is going to think that the centre of Government spends its whole time sort of conniving behind the backs of everyone else in Government. That is not the reality. The reality is people trying to get on with delivering the business of the Government the vast majority of the time. My best answer to that question is that it is unusual. However, in the end, it is particularly around things where you might have a policy disagreement or difference of view between the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State.

It is not unheard of for permanent secretaries, in a sense, to try and work in a way which allows there to be a decision, and a consensus view in the Government to then move ahead and take it forward. In that sort of situation, it is not unheard of for a permanent secretary to be privy to something that they are asked not to pass on to their Secretary of State. I would describe it as not unheard of, but I do not want to give the impression that this is standard operating procedure.

Q884 **Chair:** But this is absolutely extraordinary. The permanent secretary at the Foreign Office can be told, "Don't tell your boss about this" when they are the Foreign Secretary? Has that ever happened to you before this?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes, it has.

Q885 **Chair:** Really?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes.

Chair: Well, you learn something new every day.

Q886 **Edward Morello:** I suppose we should ask if that operates the other way. A lot of this seems to come down to what the Prime Minister was told and



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when. How frequently are people being asked to withhold information from the Prime Minister? Has that happened as well?

Sir Philip Barton: I cannot speak for No. 10 or the Prime Minister. I would never say to No. 10 that you cannot tell the Prime Minister. I always worked on the assumption that if I am speaking to No. 10, there is a possibility—and that is for them to judge—that the information I am relaying to No. 10 might go to the Prime Minister.

Q887 **Edward Morello:** Much of this seems to hinge on how much the Prime Minister knew when he was making a decision to appoint Peter Mandelson—and the briefing that he may or may not have got.

Sir Philip Barton: I cannot help you with that because I was not involved.

Q888 **Edward Morello:** I appreciate that. You said that you were not involved in the decision-making process around Peter Mandelson because it was a political appointment. Was the Foreign Secretary involved in the decision making?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not know.

Q889 **Edward Morello:** Okay. I mentioned already you served under four Prime Ministers. A search through the records, and you can correct me on this, suggests that the only other political appointment that happened during your tenure as permanent secretary was Sir George Hollingbery, the former Member of Parliament for Meon Valley, who was appointed ambassador to Cuba during the Johnson Administration. Comparing those two processes and the timelines, how markedly different was the Mandelson appointment from the appointment of Sir George Hollingbery?

Sir Philip Barton: You might need to get chapter and verse on this from the FCDO. During my tenure, the only two serving political appointees were Lord Llewellyn as the ambassador in Paris and then Rome, and Sir George Hollingbery in Cuba.

I cannot absolutely promise you, because I started in September 2020 at the height of covid and had to lead a complex merger, but from memory, George Hollingbery's appointment was done before I started, even if he did not take up post until after I started. Certainly, I was not involved in doing anything around his appointment; I think it was certainly already decided even if it had not been announced. It was then taken forward in what I would describe as the normal way for an ambassadorial appointment, with time to go through the steps in the normal sequence, if that answers your question.

Q890 **Edward Morello:** It does, thank you. More broadly in terms of the process, you have already mentioned that you have never seen the now infamous traffic-light boxes. Apparently, according to the letter we received last night, the departmental head of security had also never seen the traffic-light boxes and was not aware of them. Sir Olly has talked us through the fact that he had a meeting with the head of security. In your time as permanent secretary, did you ever have a meeting with a head of

security to discuss whether or not somebody should be cleared DV?

Sir Philip Barton: No. I do not recall a recommendation from UKSV ever being escalated to me during my tenure.

Q891 **Edward Morello:** So that was unique. Given that you never had cause to see the traffic-light system, should we read anything into the fact that Sir Olly, when he had that meeting, was not shown it?

Sir Philip Barton: I would rest on what you were told in the FCDO's letter last night.

Q892 **Dan Carden:** Can I pick up on one point? In the letter last night, it says it is "unusual" where there is a difference between UKSV recommendation and FCDO sign off, but it says that there is "more than one a month."

Sir Philip Barton: Sorry, the door opened and I missed the end of the question.

Dan Carden: The letter last night says that it is "unusual but not exceptional" for UKSV recommendations to differ to the final FCDO decision on vetting, but it says that there is "more than one a month" of those cases. But you are saying that they are not raised to the permanent secretary level?

Sir Philip Barton: Right.

Q893 **Dan Carden:** Who would then make that decision?

Sir Philip Barton: I think that is set out in the letter. If I remember right, it sets out the decision-making hierarchy, but you would have to get chapter and verse from the Department.

Q894 **Uma Kumaran:** If you had become aware that there were issues with UKSV, given how high profile this appointment was, would you have raised this with the Foreign Secretary?

Sir Philip Barton: I genuinely do not think that is a question I can answer because, rightly, I do not know anything about the substance of the concerns. What I would say is, when you are a permanent secretary you have what I describe as crucible moments. You are basically being asked to decide something sensitive, sometimes under time pressure, and you cannot discuss that with anybody. I really do not think that I can second-guess somebody's decision in those circumstances when I am not in them and do not have the information and the environment of that time.

Q895 **Uma Kumaran:** I understand, but you have said that it is very unusual for security matters to be raised and certainly in your time that never happened. Given how unusual it was, and given the media spotlight on this already controversial decision to appoint Peter Mandelson—looking at the civil service code of conduct, there is an expectation for Ministers to be briefed properly by the civil service—would you have exercised your judgment to say, "Actually, this is one of those times. Perhaps I need to have a conversation with the Foreign Secretary."?



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Sir Philip Barton: I am genuinely not being difficult, but I cannot answer that question in the abstract. Without having the briefing and knowing the information, I cannot tell you what I would have done—I actually do not know.

Q896 **Uma Kumaran:** I understand. Do you recall your conversation with Sir Olly regarding the handover of this decision? In that conversation, did you discuss any of the pressures, whether that be time pressure or political pressure?

Sir Philip Barton: We had about a week, but he spent a certain amount of that time talking to other people and reading documents. We had a conversation at the beginning of the week, and then at the end of the week we had a longish meeting where I went through some of the senior personnel issues. We talked about some of the future appointments that were coming up, and how he might want to think about that. It was what you would expect in a professional handover.

On some of the things that I knew, or wanted to him to know, I was probably the best-placed person to actually tell him all of that. As part of that, I did describe to him, in headline terms, the process that we had been through and where we had got to in the appointment of Mandelson, and the preparations for him to arrive in Washington.

Q897 **Uma Kumaran:** As part of that process, did you raise any concerns that you had personally, or any risks that you thought might arise as a result of it?

Sir Philip Barton: My memory is that we had a general conversation, mostly about what had happened and where it had got to. The one thing I do remember discussing and agreeing with Olly is how we would handle the conflict of interest form. I had seen a draft of it, and I had commented on it, but Olly and I agreed that it was not sensible for me to sign off on it in my final week, not least because he was going to have to justify whatever was in there. I remember a conversation around how best to handle the conflict of interest in the transition from me to him.

Q898 **Uma Kumaran:** Understood. In your earlier answers, you spoke to the Chair about the pressure to get the ambassador in post before the inauguration.

Sir Philip Barton: Yes.

Uma Kumaran: Christmas and other time pressures notwithstanding, that is why you did the process as you did. Would you have briefed anyone else who was considered for that post, if they were not a political appointment? Let us say that it was not Peter Mandelson, and it was not a political appointment, but you knew this was the most likely candidate. Do you think that the same thing would have happened?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes.

Q899 **Uma Kumaran:** Okay. On this announcement, you said that the normal order was for the vetting to happen first, and the announcement to



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happen second. Obviously, you said that it was No. 10's decision for it to have gone in this order. Did you know that that was going to happen? Were you aware that it was being announced?

Sir Philip Barton: When did I know it was going to be announced? Probably by the end of 18 December, and certainly by the morning of 19 December. It was either the end of 18 December or the beginning of the Thursday that I knew No. 10 was going to announce the following day.

Q900 **Uma Kumaran:** Did you warn of any risk of proceeding this way? Did you speak to the Foreign Secretary, anyone at No. 10 or anyone else in the Department?

Sir Philip Barton: The die was cast, to be honest. I think we had a discussion around practicalities.

Q901 **Uma Kumaran:** But there was not any intervention from you.

Sir Philip Barton: In what regard?

Q902 **Uma Kumaran:** The fact that there are risks in proceeding this way, and that the normal process is for vetting to happen first and the announcement second—that by going ahead with this timeline, which is not the normal process, No. 10 and the Foreign Office could be open to criticism and/or process failures.

Sir Philip Barton: To be honest, as I say, the die was cast; the Prime Minister had decided, the timetable was set and No. 10 wanted to announce.

Q903 **Chair:** I still do not understand this. The die was so set that you were not in a position to say, "I don't think this is a good idea. I think you should do DV first before the announcement," yet you say, "It still wouldn't have been a problem; if he'd failed his DV, we would have announced that."

Sir Philip Barton: I think the difference is if there had been—I'm talking in the generic here, obviously, because I don't know anything about the substance. Generically, if there had been sufficient material in any case—you're talking about the beginning of the process and the end of the process. Talking about the beginning of the process is one thing; the end of the process is a different thing, because you have a body of material.

Alan Gemmell: Sir Philip, I should put it on record that you and I worked briefly together when you were high commissioner to India and I was Her Majesty's then trade commissioner, a job for which I had to get DV.

Sir Philip Barton: Nice to see you again.

Q904 **Alan Gemmell:** Nice to see you, too. The issue we are struggling with, in part, is judgment. One of the main problems is that the initial judgment to appoint Peter Mandelson was flawed. Some are trying to say that the FCDO process, the vetting process, could have corrected that flawed initial decision. Is it fair to say, when you look at Ian Collard's response, that politicians inserted enormous risk into the system by appointing Peter



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Mandelson, and that what Olly Robbins and the FCDO did was use their processes legitimately to manage that risk, or do you think they were outside that standard FCDO process?

Sir Philip Barton: I don't know anything about the substance and I have no view, therefore, on the judgments made around the substance. I do think what they did—as I understand it—was within the process.

Q905 **Fleur Anderson:** Thank you very much, Sir Philip, for coming to give us evidence today. I have some questions about the due diligence part of the process. Were there any other FCDO appointments like this, where you were told about the due diligence, and it was an FCDO appointment, after the due diligence had been done?

Sir Philip Barton: I am not aware, for ambassador jobs, of any due diligence being done of this sort or form. It is not part of a normal civil service process, so I do not recognise it.

Q906 **Fleur Anderson:** But have you had experience of people not passing due diligence? Is it a process that is a pass or fail then?

Sir Philip Barton: To be honest, it is not a standard process. The closest I can come to it is, for example—this may be a total red herring, so if you want me to stop, I'll stop—recruitment for non-executive directors of departments. They are obviously outsiders because that is the point. They have in the past been subject to a look at their social media profile and that sort of thing, to see whether that throws up anything which makes them unsuitable for a non-executive role in a Government Department. That is a bit different, but that is the closest comparator. But in terms of appointment processes for full-time, on-the-books jobs rather than a non-executive role, in the FCDO it is not part of the process and certainly not for ambassador jobs.

Q907 **Fleur Anderson:** Just a bit more on the process: you were told about it in a phone call on 15 December, but you were not given the due diligence checklist, which we have in front of us—it is part of the Humble Address papers—that had already been completed. Did you see the conflict of interest paper at that time?

Sir Philip Barton: No, because it was not completed. It was basically sent to Mandelson, if I remember right, the following week or the week after. Let me just check to make sure I give you the right date. On the conflict of interest, I saw that over the weekend of, I think, 4 and 5 January, and I had some points on it—further points that I wanted addressed. I remember actually writing an email because it was a Sunday; I wrote an email setting out those points.

Q908 **Fleur Anderson:** Who did you write the email to?

Sir Philip Barton: My office—someone in the Department dealing with it.

Q909 **Fleur Anderson:** So they were the concerns that would have been raised



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by the due diligence form about the different things we can see here. Epstein, for example, was in that.

Sir Philip Barton: I can't speak to due diligence; I wasn't involved. On the conflict of interest form, it is a clear form that you fill out, setting out areas in your life that might create a conflict. Then there is a process with the line manager—the ambassador to Washington is managed by the permanent under-secretary—to agree whether that conflict is surmountable or not, and the mitigations and so on.

Q910 **Fleur Anderson:** Is there a precedent of you seeing a due diligence form or for asking—I know this is an unusual appointment, because the Cabinet Office did the due diligence, so you didn't see it. Could you have asked for the FCDO to also do due diligence, seeing that you were going to be Peter Mandelson's line manager and you were directly responsible in that way?

Sir Philip Barton: If I remember right, I think I asked to see it and was told that it formed advice to the Prime Minister, and therefore it was not something I could see. I think what you are suggesting is that, after I have been told, "The Prime Minister's had due diligence done; he's seen it and decided this," I am going to say, "Well, that's not good enough for me; I'm going to do my own due diligence." I don't think that's plausible. Obviously, there were the pre-existing conflict of interest process and national security vetting process, which were gone through.

Q911 **Fleur Anderson:** Just to be clear—I think you have been asked before about how you raised this with the Foreign Secretary—in that week of the 15th, you were told, and, on the 18th, it became public. Did you have a conversation with the Foreign Secretary during that week? This is the most high-profile appointment and it is a very controversial appointment—

Sir Philip Barton: I was clear in my own mind that I needed to know that the Foreign Secretary was content before I went to His Majesty the King to seek his agreement. Obviously the Prime Minister is involved as well, but a diplomatic service appointment—an ambassador—is ultimately responsible to the Foreign Secretary.

If I remember right, the Monday was the day of the annual Australia-UK ministerial meeting, which both the Foreign Secretary and I were pretty busy with, both in our own rights—my counterpart was here, as well as Penny Wong—but also together in joint meetings for much of the day. My memory is that I had a brief word in the margins of that to relay to the Foreign Secretary what I had been told and, if I remember right, he said he would talk to No. 10.

Fleur Anderson: So you were told by a phone call, then you were in the same meeting together and then you said, "I've been told that this is going to happen," and the Foreign Secretary said that he would have words with No. 10 after that. Then did you hear anything back from that?

Sir Philip Barton: I didn't say he would "have words", which obviously can be read differently—

Fleur Anderson: No—let's make this very clear.

Sir Philip Barton: He said he would talk to No. 10.

Q912 **Fleur Anderson:** He said he would talk to No. 10 about that. Did you hear back from that before you then wrote that letter to say he was appointed?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes. I had the letter from the principal private secretary for foreign affairs on the morning of Wednesday the 18th; I established the Foreign Secretary was content for me to take forward the process, and I then wrote to Sir Clive. The letter is part of the release, as you know.

Fleur Anderson: Is there any record of that meeting where you established that the Foreign Secretary was happy with that?

Sir Philip Barton: He was travelling, and I had an exchange with someone in the travelling party and had a message back that he was content for me to write. He was on his way, I think, to a dinner of NATO Foreign Ministers.

Q913 **Chair:** Can I just follow up on this? The purpose of due diligence is to look at reputational risks, so if I was the Foreign Secretary and one of my ambassadors had gone rogue, it would be for me to be answerable for that, right? Surely it is important in those circumstances for me to see the due diligence.

Sir Philip Barton: I do not know the extent to which the Foreign Secretary was involved prior to the Prime Minister's decision.

Chair: I do not understand what that answer is. You said that you had asked to see the due diligence, and you were told that it was something for the Prime Minister, and now you have given whatever answer that is.

Sir Philip Barton: Sorry, Chair, would you mind repeating that question?

Chair: Did the Foreign Secretary see the due diligence or not before you told the King, "I've discussed this with the Foreign Secretary, who agrees with the recommendation"?

Sir Philip Barton: I am not aware that he saw it.

Q914 **Chair:** Are you aware that the Deputy Prime Minister has now said that there were worries about Peter Mandelson's appointment at the time? He said to LBC that there was a "discussion within Government", but that, ultimately, it was a matter for No. 10.

Sir Philip Barton: I saw the media report at the time.

Chair: And is that all you are going to tell me?

Sir Philip Barton: Chair, honestly, I am not being difficult; if you ask me a question, I will answer it, but I should also say I am obviously not here to speak for the Foreign Secretary. You kindly pointed out at the beginning that I am not a civil servant any more—

Q915 Edward Morello: Do you have a view on the accuracy of the statement?

Sir Philip Barton: I will just read it again. To be honest, again, I think you should ask the Foreign—if you want to know the Foreign Secretary's views, I don't really feel I should speak for him.

Chair: But you were there in the middle of all of this. The Foreign Secretary is your boss—

Sir Philip Barton: Fair enough.

Chair: You are telling us that the Foreign Secretary was happy, and you told the King that. The then Foreign Secretary—now the Deputy Prime Minister—is saying that, actually, there were concerns and there were discussions going on. Which is true?

Sir Philip Barton: Got it. I am not being unhelpful, I promise you. Let me put it this way: I was asked what the Foreign Secretary said when I told him. He did not say, "Philip, please crack on. Write to the King." He actually said, "I'm going to talk to No. 10."

Q916 Chair: That is it?

Sir Philip Barton: We were in the margins of big, important meetings with the top of the Australian foreign and security system in what is always a very pressurised period, the run-up to Christmas, and this was about a political appointment. He was my political boss, as Foreign Secretary. I gave him the information I had been told. He said that he would talk to No. 10.

Q917 Uma Kumaran: I have a follow-up to that. Yesterday, the former Foreign Secretary, now Deputy Prime Minister, said—as the Chair said—that he had expressed worries. You said that this was a conversation in the margins. Given how serious an appointment it was, and the level of media scrutiny—rightly—that there was on this appointment, did you have any further conversations with the then Foreign Secretary about those worries?

Sir Philip Barton: As I recall, he and I had a brief conversation. I cannot recall if it was on the 17th or the 18th—the Tuesday or the Wednesday. It was inconclusive. He was not, at that point, saying that he was content for me to proceed. I had not in any case received what I had asked for. At the outset I said to No. 10, "I'm not doing anything until I've got something in writing." At the point of that conversation, I had not received a letter from the principal private secretary and so we had inconclusive conversations.

Q918 Uma Kumaran: Did you raise any of your concerns with the Foreign Secretary, for him to make a judgment to pass them on, or anything like that? Was there any conversation about the worries that you both seem to have had?

Sir Philip Barton: I think the Foreign Secretary should speak for himself on his views and what was said. At that point I was doing my best to resolve the situation, to establish what I was being asked to do by the top

of the Government and then to take the bureaucratic steps necessary either way.

Q919 Fleur Anderson: So it was a situation that needed to be resolved during that week. Do you think that the process of that week—the due diligence part of this and the timing of it—is evidence of pressure, of undue pressure, or of due process being followed?

Sir Philip Barton: I am really sorry, but I am not sure that I follow you.

Fleur Anderson: By your own admission it was a very unusual political appointment. The whole process tested the system to the limit. We are looking at how the system worked in this case but also at what we need to learn for the future. You were told quite late on in the process. Due diligence had been done, then you were told that he was going to be appointed, then it was very publicly announced, very quickly. Is the timing of all that, in your opinion, evidence of pressure, of undue pressure, or of due process being followed—at pace, yes, and given you are in a high-pressure environment all the time in your role?

Sir Philip Barton: The short timescale created the pressure, as I said earlier. In terms of the parts that the FCDO and I were responsible for, I have mentioned conflict of interest, vetting and other decisions. I am very confident that those decisions were taken, albeit under pressure, properly. As I have already been clear, No. 10's decision to announce in advance of DV was unusual.

Q920 Fleur Anderson: With the benefit of hindsight and many months to look at this and to think about the whole process, where did the process go wrong? Was it at the early stage of even considering him, was it the due diligence, or was it the vetting?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not have complete knowledge or insight into the process prior to the Prime Minister's decision, so I cannot answer that question.

Q921 Chair: You told us that it is the normal process to do vetting and then the announcement. For comparison purposes, when it came to the appointment of Jonathan Powell, was he vetted and then announced?

Sir Philip Barton: I was not involved in his appointment.

Chair: Ah, he is not Foreign Office.

Sir Philip Barton: He is the National Security Adviser, which is a Cabinet Office role.

Q922 Aphra Brandreth: What about when he was special envoy to the British Indian Ocean Territories?

Sir Philip Barton: Envoys are different and are dealt with differently. I honestly cannot remember the sequencing on that, so you would need to ask the Department.

Q923 Alex Ballinger: Sir Philip, you have talked about the short timescale



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causing problems. Do you think there was a reasonable diplomatic reason why No. 10 wanted the appointment done by Trump's inauguration?

Sir Philip Barton: Look, once the Prime Minister has decided that they want a change of very high-profile ambassador, you do not want to wait too long; you want to get on with making that change. My own view was that it was not essential for Mandelson to be there by the time of the inauguration. It always takes a while for US Governments to form because of the confirmation process. It was actually quite quick with Trump 2 compared with Trump 1, but it does take weeks. I was personally much less concerned and did not see that as an absolutely essential thing. Of course, Karen Pierce was willing to stay longer and be flexible, within reason, and well respected and connected to the Trump transition team. So yes, I can entirely see the point of getting on with it; I was not quite as convinced that we had to see 20 January as a deadline, but that was the one we had been set and was communicated very clearly by the top of the Government.

Q924 **Alex Ballinger:** Did you say that to No. 10?

Sir Philip Barton: To be honest, I would have been clear that we didn't have to, but it is also true that, in the end, Lord Mandelson did not go until after the inauguration.

Q925 **Alex Ballinger:** With any other external appointments, including political appointments, are there examples where somebody has started in post before they have received their DV and have had access to those materials?

Sir Philip Barton: I am not aware of an ambassador starting in post, certainly externally, without DV. I cannot speak for history, if you know what I mean.

Alex Ballinger: But in your tenure.

Sir Philip Barton: In recent times, no.

Q926 **Alex Ballinger:** Do you think the argument that Lord Mandelson would not need DV clearance because he was a Privy Counsellor was credible?

Sir Philip Barton: As I said, my initial reaction was that it was odd and insufficient, so no. That was why I asked for advice. We did also pretty quickly settle on him needing DV.

Q927 **Alex Ballinger:** You said there were higher classifications of material that he would not have had access to. Before he received his DV, what level of classification was Mandelson able to access?

Sir Philip Barton: It is in the letter, but I think "up to Secret" was allowed—it is point 5 on whatever page it is.

Q928 **Alex Ballinger:** So there were no briefings he was given above that level of classification before he received vetting?

Sir Philip Barton: Not that I am aware of.

Q929 Alex Ballinger: Did the intelligence agencies ever share any concerns with you about Mandelson's appointment or his access to information?

Sir Philip Barton: No.

Q930 Alex Ballinger: Thank you. Knowing what you know now about Peter Mandelson's relationship with Epstein and everything else, do you think that the UKSV made the correct decision, and that the FCDO made the correct decision?

Sir Philip Barton: I am not aware of any of the substance of the DV process. I genuinely cannot answer that question.

Q931 Alex Ballinger: Does it change your view on the appropriateness of political appointments to ambassadorial positions at all?

Sir Philip Barton: This one self-evidently has not worked out, but Lord Llewellyn was a brilliant ambassador to Paris and then Rome, and George Hollingbery did a good job in Cuba. The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary are absolutely entitled to make political appointments; that is explicitly allowed for in the legislation. I do not have any objection. Clearly, when I was head of the diplomatic service, I was head of the diplomatic profession and, inevitably, you are head of the tribe even if you are not chief trade unionist. Within reason, they are a good idea. Personally, as a diplomat, I would argue that the vast majority of jobs should go to diplomats, but they have been successfully used in the past.

Q932 Alex Ballinger: Finally, do you think the Prime Minister's statement that "full due process was followed" is a fair description of what happened in Mandelson's case?

Sir Philip Barton: You know, I am going to dodge; I am really sorry, but I do not think it is for me—it is for others, including all of you as Members of Parliament, to come to a view on that.

Q933 Alex Ballinger: As a permanent secretary, would you have said in another case—

Sir Philip Barton: I am not going to answer your question. Let me describe what I have said to you today, in my own mind. As I said, the processes in the FCDO—the bit I was responsible for—were followed until I stepped down on Sunday 19 January. That was proper process, done at pace, as we were asked. I was involved but not responsible. It was unusual for the announcement to be made before he received DV.

Alex Ballinger: Thank you.

Q934 Edward Morello: I think this follows on from what Alex was asking you, Sir Philip. You are requesting to see the due diligence report; you are flagging to the Foreign Secretary that you have concerns. In his evidence, Sir Olly told us that this was the only time in which the security department requested to see him on whether to grant clearance. You have told us that, during your tenure, there was no situation in which you met the security department regarding granting clearance. Is there any precedence for this number of red flags to be raised on appointment?

Sir Philip Barton: That is a really impossible question for me to answer.

Chair: Not really.

Sir Philip Barton: No, it is, because any appointment—

Q935 **Edward Morello:** Do you want me to narrow it down?

Sir Philip Barton: Previous Governments of different political persuasions over time, have made, shall I say, not the smartest appointments in whole different areas. But if I reframe your question as around an appointment to an ambassadorial role during my tenure, then the answer is yes. Or no, rather—whichever agrees with the thrust of your question, whether that was yes or no.

Q936 **Aphra Brandreth:** I wanted to ask a very quick follow-up to one of the questions Alex asked, about the types and levels of classified information that Peter Mandelson saw prior to going out to the US. Would you have expected the ambassador to the US to be briefed on and know what was in the China audit?

Sir Philip Barton: I had left, unfortunately, before the China audit had been completed. I am slightly hamstrung by not knowing the absolute classification of that, because some of the things about our China policy are obviously very highly classified. I am not ducking the question, but I do not really know. Remember, it was not complete at that point. It had not been completed before I left. My guess is that, on China, Lord Mandelson would have been told a fair amount, but there would have been some things of a higher classification that he would not have been able to know until later. However, I am surmising rather than knowing, to be honest with you.

Q937 **Aphra Brandreth:** I completely understand that you said you are guessing that, but were you aware that it was expected that briefings would include some information about the work that was being undertaken as part of the China audit?

Sir Philip Barton: I would have expected him to have been briefed on the evolution of the Government's policy on China, so that he was ready to talk to the US Administration about the UK Government's policy on China—that is, doing his job. That must have included, therefore, his being briefed on where the Government's audit of China policy had got to, if that answers your question. So basically, yes.

Q938 **Alan Gemmell:** Sir Philip, was the correct process followed in the dismissal of Olly Robbins?

Sir Philip Barton: You save the easy questions for last! I do not think I can answer that question. It is clearly going to be a matter, or may become a matter, of formal legal dispute. I guess what I can say is that, when I was permanent under-secretary, there were a number of very serious disciplinary cases during my time that led to dismissal, and they all involved some process. But only the Prime Minister, Sir Olly and those involved know what happened; I don't, so I can't answer your question.

Q939 Alan Gemmell: But in your cases, you would probably see someone suspended as an investigation took place, or for some there would have been summary dismissal, as we have seen.

Sir Philip Barton: In a serious gross misconduct case in the FCDO—for an FCDO member of staff, however serious—in my time it was suspension, and there was at least one case of removal from post for an overseas ambassador. Then there was a very short period to do a formal process.

Alan Gemmell: Thank you. I want to ask about the due diligence report, but does anyone else want to come in?

Chair: I think Uma wants to come in on the back of that, and then we will go back to you.

Q940 Uma Kumaran: Sir Philip, this is a question about judgment and the reasons why Sir Olly left his post. Would you have informed No. 10 or the Prime Minister of the concerns about Peter Mandelson and those leaked emails—the emails released by the US Department for Justice—after the decision to sack Mandelson? If the view from the civil service is that you don't inform your principal before, would you have intervened after, when all this information is in the public domain?

Sir Philip Barton: I don't think I can answer that question for the reason I gave earlier—not being in the moment. I recognise that the Prime Minister clearly genuinely believes that he should have been told. Sir Olly set out for you his view, including, if I understood him right, that he felt that he was bound by the rules not to discuss the information from the vetting process, although that is now disputed—you had different evidence from Cat Little. I personally think that it is a very good thing that someone of Sir Adrian Fulford's stature has been asked to look into this, because we cannot be in this damaging situation again. I am afraid that I can't answer your question, but we need a proper look at this, because it is very damaging.

Q941 Uma Kumaran: I agree. Would you let me ask one final question, Chair? This appointment was a hugely significant decision. It had national and international repercussions, as well as reputational risk. There was a well-publicised friendship with Jeffrey Epstein. The view of the FCDO and the civil service, time and again, has been that they cannot intervene because the rules do not let them intervene, so they had to take a passive approach. Given everything we know, do you think that the system should be changed?

Sir Philip Barton: I don't know the answer to that question. That is why I am pleased that Sir Adrian Fulford has been asked to look at this. I know him from his time as the first Investigatory Powers Commissioner, and, if I remember rightly—he may still do this—he was the final appeal for vetting process cases. I think he is the right person to get at that question. It is definitely right to look at it.

Chair: We will go back to Alan.

Q942 Alan Gemmell: In her follow-up to her evidence to the Committee, Cat



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Little confirmed that there was no Cabinet Office advice ahead of the decision that Morgan McSweeney and Matthew Doyle should follow up questions with Peter Mandelson about Epstein. Have you any views about whether they were the right people to do that? Would someone independent of the process, or someone trained in vetting, have been better to follow up the due diligence process?

Sir Philip Barton: It was a political appointment, with the process being run out of No. 10, and the due diligence was conducted by the centre in a way that I have already said is not part of normal civil service practices. In the end, who is doing the questioning and whether that is appropriate comes down to who and what weight is being put on those questions and who answers them. I genuinely don't know, because it wasn't me making the decision—I wasn't involved. It wasn't therefore for me to say, "That's good enough," or, "That's not good enough, as the conduit for the questions." I wasn't being asked and was not involved in putting any faith in that conduit.

Q943 **Dan Carden:** We have gone around this issue of due diligence in vetting over and over again. I am surprised that you have never seen a DV report—is that correct?

Sir Philip Barton: The only papers I saw on DV were in my formal role as the permanent secretary in signing off the outcomes of appeals. Someone being refused has the right to appeal, and those papers would come to me, but they did not include vetting files. Aside from those appeal papers, and the forms I filled out for my own vetting, I have never seen vetting papers.

Q944 **Dan Carden:** That would align with what Sir Olly told us about having only an oral briefing. We now have two people—him and Ian Collard—telling us that this was a borderline case.

Sir Philip Barton: Yes, although, just to repeat what I said earlier, a case was never escalated to me in that way.

Q945 **Dan Carden:** What this Committee has been led to believe is that red flags and denials of clearance were part of this. The bit I think you can help us with is the process through which Olly Robbins finds himself sacked. You have been following this as closely as anybody else. Just to phrase the question differently, do you understand why Sir Olly Robbins has been sacked?

Sir Philip Barton: I have not seen the letter he was sent—I cannot and do not speak for him, and neither do I speak for the Government—so I cannot sit here today and say that I know. I note also that Sir Olly was very clear in his evidence to you in basically saying that he wasn't going to talk about that.

Q946 **Dan Carden:** In the end, the FCDO is a "make recommendations" Department, because it takes responsibility for passing clearance and has the power to manage risks and to mitigate those risks. That is the process that all the evidence that we have seen shows us has happened, which also aligns with what the Prime Minister has said—that due process was

followed.

Sir Philip Barton: That sounds right to me. I read carefully last night the letter the Foreign Office sent to you; I was not directly involved in anything after 19 January, but it rang true.

Q947 **Sir John Whittingdale:** You will be aware that a number of very senior former civil servants have spoken about how damaging this episode has been for the civil service. As a former very experienced permanent secretary and head of the diplomatic service, what is your assessment of how this has affected the civil service, and in particular the diplomatic service?

Sir Philip Barton: Thank you for that question. I am glad you asked it; it is a very important one. It is also important to remember the wider context. The British system of government works best when civil servants and Ministers, including at the highest level, work together effectively to deliver the programme of the elected Government of the day, while respecting that they have got slightly different jobs, roles and responsibilities. Whenever that is not happening effectively, you are not able to deliver as well. You need to have load-bearing relationships at the most senior levels as well. I do think there is a challenge now, and I think it is incumbent on all of us, including people no longer in government who can perhaps help from the sidelines, to try to get back to a situation where the Government of the day, including the leadership of the Government of the day, and the civil service of the day have trusting relationships, understanding that they both have different pressures on them and slightly different roles but that they need to work together as a team to deliver for the country.

Q948 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Do you think the trusting relationship, at present, has broken down?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not like black and white terminology like "broken down". I do think, self-evidently, that there are now challenges, at least for some people in the relationships.

Chair: Not least people who think they are in charge of their Departments who understand that their permanent secretaries have been told not to tell them things.

Q949 **Fleur Anderson:** I have one more question—one more piece of the puzzle—going back to access talks that you held before the election with people who were then shadow Ministers. Did the issue of political appointments, including the appointment of the ambassador to the US or appointing Peter Mandelson, come up in access talks, and would those access talks have been recorded?

Sir Philip Barton: If your question is, "Were there records of access talks?", the answer is yes. If your question is, "Were these aspects recorded?", I am really sorry—I cannot actually remember the rules, but at the time, there was an absolute omertà around the contents of the access talks. I am going to be cautious, even though I am no longer a civil servant, because I am still bound by the rules. I am reasonably confident

that, actually, the content of access talks is rightly not something I can say to the Committee, I am afraid—but yes, they were recorded.

Chair: Good. Thank you very much.

Examination of witness

Witness: Morgan McSweeney.

Q950 **Chair:** The Foreign Affairs Committee is continuing its inquiry into the workings of the Foreign Office and the appointment of Peter Mandelson in particular. We have just had a break, but we now continue our session with Morgan McSweeney. Thank you very much for coming. Can you introduce who you are? I understand that there is a brief statement that you want to make before we ask you some questions.

Morgan McSweeney: Thank you very much, Chair. My name is Morgan McSweeney. I was a former chief of staff to Prime Minister Keir Starmer from October 2024 until February of this year.

Thank you for inviting me to appear before this Committee today. I hope to assist you in your work as fully as I can. Before addressing the specific matters before you, I am grateful that you have allowed me to say something briefly.

First, I want to say something about the victims and survivors connected to Jeffrey Epstein. Too often, discussions of public figures and appointments can lose sight of the human suffering at the centre of these matters. Women and girls were abused, exploited and scarred. They deserved protection then, and they deserve to be remembered now. I am sorry for any part this controversy has played in causing further hurt or distress.

I have spent much of my working life trying, in whatever role I held, to make this country fairer, stronger and more successful. I have always believed public service is a privilege. It brings responsibility and scrutiny, but it also brings a meaningful chance to improve people's lives. That is what motivated me in Government.

The appointment of Mandelson as ambassador was a serious error of judgment. I advised the Prime Minister in support of that appointment, and I was wrong to do so. As I said in my resignation statement, I resigned because I believe responsibility should rest with those who make serious mistakes. Accountability in public life cannot apply only when it is convenient. The Prime Minister relied on my advice, and I got it wrong.

It is also important, however, to distinguish between what I did do and what I did not do. What I did do was make a recommendation based on my judgment that Mandelson's experience, relationships and political skills could serve the national interest in Washington at an important moment. That judgment was a mistake. What I did not do was oversee national security vetting, ask officials to ignore procedures, request that steps should be skipped or communicate explicitly or implicitly that checks

should be cleared at all costs. I would never have considered that acceptable. These processes are in place to protect our national security.

Finally, I want to place on record my respect for those who serve our country through public institutions: MPs, Ministers, civil servants, diplomats, security professionals and many others, whose work is demanding, often unseen. In the Cabinet Office, the Foreign Office and 10 Downing Street, there will be many people working long hours now to understand what happened here and to ensure lessons are learned. They deserve fairness and respect as they do that work.

Chair, I am here to assist the Committee in its work. I made a serious mistake in recommending Mandelson's appointment. I accept the consequences and hope today I can help the Committee to establish the facts and to make sure the right lessons are learned.

Q951 **Chair:** Thank you. So why was it necessary to replace Karen Pierce at all?

Morgan McSweeney: Shall I set out the timetable of my understanding of the various different decision making? So—

Q952 **Chair:** I am going to do that, but I wondered whether I could start with this: how did it even become an issue?

Morgan McSweeney: My understanding is that, before we were in government, the civil service were deciding who to appoint when Karen Pierce's term came to an end, and that in the access talks with Simon Case, he was informed that the Prime Minister was minded to make a political appointment in the role of ambassador. That predates my time as chief of staff.

At the time, I was working in opposition, and I was not working as part of the transition team. When I came in as chief of staff, I understood that to be the general direction the Prime Minister wanted to go in. A formal decision was not made until after the US presidential election, because he rightly wanted to wait until after seeing who was elected US President on 5 November.

Q953 **Chair:** Is there a note of the discussion around whether or not it should be a political appointment? Or are you saying that it was something that had already been decided before Labour got into government?

Morgan McSweeney: I only found out this weekend, as I was trying to piece together the full picture. I called Simon Case to ask him what his recollection was. His recollection was that in January/February 2024, when he was inquiring about what Labour might want to do with the US ambassador, as they were considering who to replace Karen Pierce with, he was told that the Prime Minister was minded to make a political appointment.

As far as I know, the next decision was taken in early November. The decision by the Prime Minister was formally taken in early November, after the US presidential election. I have seen a box note that went from the Prime Minister's foreign policy private office and his PPS, which asked him



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explicitly whether he would like to go ahead with a political appointment or make a civil service appointment. I don't recall any conversation about that. The next thing is that he is requesting who could potentially fill that post.

Q954 **Chair:** So that is the box note of 11 November, which is on page 2 of the Humble Address materials, and it is a PS note to the Prime Minister.

Morgan McSweeney: Yes.

Q955 **Chair:** It talks about the fact that the current ambassador to Washington has been making good inroads with the Trump team, and it talks about what the options are, essentially, on the timing of an appointment and announcement.

Morgan McSweeney: I did not input into that box note.

Q956 **Chair:** No—neither did anybody else, it looks like. When it comes to the Prime Minister's comments and the outer office comments, there was not anything on that.

Morgan McSweeney: I don't think there was any input from any of the spads into that. It was just a straightforward, "What would you like to do, Prime Minister?", but there wasn't a recommendation.

Q957 **Chair:** There was a list of candidates. David Miliband, Cathy Ashton, Peter Mandelson and even George Osborne were the names that, according to *The Guardian* and Tom Baldwin's book, were being considered at the time. Is that right?

Morgan McSweeney: Those sound like the right names to me. I do not recall there being much discussion ahead of the US presidential election. I think the Prime Minister, rightly, wanted to wait to see the outcome of that. If Kamala Harris had won that US presidential election, I don't think Peter Mandelson would have necessarily been appointed—he probably wouldn't have been. I think the Prime Minister started to seriously consider names after the US election.

Q958 **Chair:** Just so that we get the timeline right, you became head of office on 6 October?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes.

Q959 **Chair:** You really wanted Peter Mandelson to be the ambassador, didn't you?

Morgan McSweeney: I thought he was the right choice after the US presidential election. The reason why I thought he was the right choice is that the UK was exposed after Brexit. We left the European Union without any US trade deal. For me, I understood that the top priority of the Prime Minister was to get a US trade deal with the Americans, and I thought that, based on Mandelson's experience as an EU trade commissioner, that made him the strongest candidate. But, like everybody else, I made it clear to the Prime Minister that there were pros and cons, and there were risks. I don't think the Prime Minister would have chosen Mandelson if

Kamala Harris had been elected president. I think he considered who would be the right fit for the White House, and we procured him a shortlist of two strong candidates at that point.

Q960 **Chair:** I will come on to that in a minute. It was more than that—it was personal as well, wasn't it? He was your mentor, particularly when you became chief of staff because you had no experience with the weird and wonderful world of Whitehall, but obviously Peter Mandelson did. Didn't he become an indispensable and venerated confidant for you?

Morgan McSweeney: He was a confidant for me, but I didn't regard him as my mentor. I first had a conversation with Peter Mandelson in 2017. I don't think I really started to go to him for advice until about 2021, and I was 44 years of age then, so I did not regard him at all as a mentor. I got advice from him and it was useful, but I also had other people around who were perhaps a bit more shy with the media, from whom I sought advice. We brought in some extremely experienced people from the Blair Administration. Liz Lloyd came into our team and Jonathan Powell came into our team, and I would certainly ask both of those for advice about how things work as well. I asked a range of people for advice and help. I don't regard Mandelson as ever being a mentor, but certainly an adviser.

Q961 **Chair:** So when the *New Statesman* says that "Morgan wouldn't breathe without consulting Mandelson first," that is not fair.

Morgan McSweeney: You will forgive me if I don't believe everything that is written about me in the papers, but I do not think that was true. He was somebody who I sought for advice, but, both when I was campaign director and chief of staff, I built a wide network of people who had done jobs similar to mine in the past, going back decades in the Labour party.

Q962 **Chair:** I will get into that. I really wanted to start with the fact that you began by working for Excalibur, which was run by Peter Mandelson. It was an attack-and-rebuttal unit, basically, in '97, and you worked on that. One of the things was to do work on Labour MPs who might be perceived as disloyal.

Morgan McSweeney: Again, Chair, I am glad I can correct some of the records on this, because this is all a bit of a mythos here.

Q963 **Chair:** This comes from *The Independent*.

Morgan McSweeney: I was an intern at the Labour party in the 2001 general election. As an intern, I was assigned to the attack-and-rebuttal team—

Q964 **Chair:** So you did not work for Excalibur in '97?

Morgan McSweeney: No.

Q965 **Chair:** So 2001 was your first time?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, that is right. My job—I hate to dispel the myth for some people, perhaps from different political parties, about what

Excalibur was—was just to glue bits of newspaper to A4 paper and scan it into a machine.

Chair: We have all done it.

Morgan McSweeney: It was literally that; that was as sophisticated as my job got. The team was not run by Mandelson; it was run by Spencer Livermore, and it included lots of future Labour politicians and spads. I never met or spoke to Mandelson in that election, and I did not even report in to the now Lord Livermore. It was much more junior people who I reported in to.

Q966 **Chair:** I also wanted to ask you about the accounts in *The i Paper* on 4 February 2026 that Mandelson was helping to vet candidates, that “He was given access to a secret Google spreadsheet of potential candidates” and that there was an “off the books” exercise. There is quite a lot of detail in the article about it, which tends to give at least an aura of authenticity to such reports.

Morgan McSweeney: Mandelson had nothing to do with the selection or vetting of any of our parliamentary candidates. I do not know what Google doc *The i* is referring to, but I am pretty sure it was not a party document. I don’t think we kept—

Q967 **Chair:** No, I think it was an off-the-books exercise. I think that is the point.

Morgan McSweeney: But it had nothing to do with me or the party. I was in a senior role in the party at the time. We did everything on the books. There might have been other people compiling their own lists, but his role had no official impact on the selection of our candidates.

Our vetting was done by a team inside HQ. It was not to do with political vetting; it was to do with inappropriate things they might have said or done prior to becoming candidates. It was an NEC process to determine the suitability of potential parliamentary candidates, but Mandelson was not involved in the selection of our candidates.

Q968 **Chair:** There was a strategy document called “Labour for the country” that was written, I believe, after the Hartlepool by-election defeat. Is it right that Peter Mandelson had a big input into that? It was your document, but was he involved in that, too?

Morgan McSweeney: No, I wrote that document in February 2021, ahead of the local elections, to the Prime Minister, because I believed there were challenges that the party was facing that it needed to address.

Hartlepool showed the scale of the political challenge we had if we wanted to win the next general election and I certainly asked Mandelson for input into that document, but it was my document and the argument was mine. I also sent it to half the shadow Cabinet and other colleagues, including most of the senior staff in LOTO at the time. A document like that, where I am trying to gather my own thoughts, I might send to 10 to 15 people from all across the party and say, “Can you give me a view?”



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Like I said earlier about Mandelson, most of the people I would go to for advice were much shyer with the media, so you could quite easily put 15 contributors towards a document like that, but it was my document and it was my argument, which I wanted to make to the leader of the party at the time about the direction I thought we needed to take.

Q969 **Chair:** After Angela Rayner resigned, it is claimed that Peter Mandelson masterminded the reshuffle of 5 September 2025. In fact, there is a quote: “That is not normal. He was the US ambassador—why was he masterminding the reshuffle?” That was reported in the *Daily Mail*. Patrick Maguire said on the day of the reshuffle Peter Mandelson was in No. 10 and would not leave. According to the *New Statesman*, just before his sacking, Mandelson had been in No. 10 to advise on the first Cabinet reshuffle.

Morgan McSweeney: Again, I am very pleased that I get the chance to correct the record on this. Mandelson was in the Cabinet Office and then I understand that he came into No. 10 on the day of the reshuffle, but he was not involved in the reshuffle.

The reshuffle was extremely challenging, because it was a bad day for our party and for the Government. We had just lost the Deputy Prime Minister and we needed to reorganise the Government at pace. The Prime Minister wanted to go ahead and do that.

I believe that the text messages from Mandelson to me on the day will be made available in the Humble Address. I cannot remember precisely what he said, but he texted me his thoughts. However, I have to say that on a reshuffle day I get texted a lot of thoughts from a lot of people. The people who I would respond to and get back to would be Cabinet members or other senior staff, to ask them their views. I did not respond to any of Mandelson’s texts.

The text messages set out ideas of people that he thought should be in particular positions. None of his suggestions actually came out to be the case, so his ideas were not followed up. I don’t mind getting ideas, but I didn’t have a conversation with him about his ideas. He asked to see me. I don’t think I actually bumped into him. I may have done, but I definitely didn’t discuss the reshuffle with him.

The only texts back from me to him were at the end of the day, when I said, “Look, I thought we did well, considering the circumstances today.” But I did not take him up on his offers of advice, I did not act on any of the advice he gave, and I did not ask him his views on any ministerial appointments.

Q970 **Chair:** Are any of your text messages to Peter Mandelson—or not—going to be available in the Humble Address?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes.

Q971 **Chair:** Why is he texting you if you are both at No. 10 on the same day?

Morgan McSweeney: Because he is not in the room.

Q972 **Chair:** And you didn't bump into him?

Morgan McSweeney: I might have bumped into him; I don't recall. But I certainly didn't ask him his views. At the point that he texted me—by the way, this was my only Government reshuffle. There is a big gap between the Prime Minister taking a decision and then the media hearing about it, because we go through a number of processes—in particular, we have to go to the palace before it is announced publicly to ask for the King's permission. So, by the time we get to the afternoon, all the work is done and you are making phone calls, and where the staff move on to is the next day.

People text me and they are entitled to do so. I mean, it will be Back-Bench MPs, Ministers, staff members, ex-staff members and journalists, and they will all text me their ideas. Everyone has an idea of how to make—

Q973 **Chair:** This is the ambassador to the United States of America. He's in No. 10 on the day of a reshuffle. I mean, it does look odd. At the very least, will you accept that?

Morgan McSweeney: It wasn't a planned reshuffle. The day before, we had all hoped that the former Deputy Prime Minister, Angela Rayner, would get cleared and that we would not have to do a reshuffle. That was our hope. Had Laurie Magnus gone another way, we wouldn't have had a reshuffle at all, so Mandelson wouldn't have been able to just arrive out of thin air.

He happened to be in the Cabinet Office that day and I do not know why he walked into No. 10. But in the room in which we were organising the reshuffle, there was the Prime Minister, and I think the Chief Whip came in once he had been appointed new, or maybe he was there the next day. And then there was a handful of his senior staff.

Mandelson was not in the room; the Prime Minister did not seek his advice. However, as chief of staff on a reshuffle day, and this was also true in opposition, I get a lot of text messages from people, and most of them I do not even read. I will pay attention to the ones I get from Cabinet members or senior staff with their ideas. I just filter out most of the rest of them, at the end of the day I go back to them and say, "Thanks for your input." I do not know why he did it, but people do it.

Q974 **Chair:** All right. Let's go back to his appointment as ambassador. There were a number of problems before he could become ambassador to the United States, the first being that he wanted to be chancellor of Oxford and the ambassador at the same time. He said on a podcast—*The Times* pod on 12 November 2024—that he thought he could do both jobs. Is it right that you asked for official advice on whether or not the role of ambassador to the United States could be part time?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't recall that I asked if it could be part time.

Q975 **Chair:** I am relying in particular on an article in *The Observer* on 4 February 2026: "Morgan McSweeney sought official advice over whether

Peter Mandelson, who resigned from the Lords this week in disgrace, could be the UK's ambassador to the US and chancellor of University of Oxford at the same time, sources have claimed."

Morgan McSweeney: I don't have any recollection of it.

Q976 **Chair:** It went on: "Officials 'had to explain that being his majesty's ambassador in Washington was a full-time job...in Washington'".

Morgan McSweeney: I do remember thinking that at the time—that it was a full-time job; I understood that. Like I say, at the time that he was doing that, had Kamala Harris won the US presidential election, I do not think he would have got the job. He was certainly lobbying for the job, but I think that Oxford University shows he was also hedging, because he did not know what he was going to get, or did not think he was going to get it, so he was also looking at other opportunities. He did say to me, when he was saying to me that he was interested in the job, that he was also going for Oxford University. My view to him was, "These are incompatible. I don't see how you could do both."

Q977 **Chair:** So if you are telling him that they are incompatible, you would not be asking for official advice on whether he could do it part time.

Morgan McSweeney: I do not think I would have, but I cannot say for certain.

Q978 **Chair:** Why wouldn't you remember something like that? It is pretty interesting.

Morgan McSweeney: I can't remember doing so. I think you are right: I would remember if I would have, but I cannot remember ever doing so.

Q979 **Chair:** Okay. One of the other problems was that Keir didn't like him. Again, this is from the *New Statesman*: "Keir doesn't even like him, and never really has...He's not Keir's sort of person." And the Foreign Office definitely did not like him, as far as we can tell. Then, of course, there are all the red flags. So all these things are problems getting in the way of Peter Mandelson becoming ambassador, but you still wanted him to be ambassador, right?

Morgan McSweeney: At the time, in Downing Street, there were conversations about who could be the best candidate. Names were considered, and most people were making pros and cons arguments. I have to say I know that a lot of people now say they told the Prime Minister they were against it at the time. From everything I know about how the Prime Minister works, he will consult widely; he will take a lot of views on. If everybody else was opposed to this appointment but me, he would not have made an appointment such as that. He does like to try to build consensus within his team and to get a wide range of views, and he does not just listen to one person on it. He certainly spoke to other Ministers, other senior staff, and took his time reaching the decision that he reached.

Q980 **Chair:** Can I suggest something to you? You wanted him to be



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ambassador, and so what you did is you bided your time for the first six weeks after your appointment as head of office—and then you went for it. As Jonathan Powell has said, it was weirdly rushed. I don't think it was rushed at all; what I would suggest is that it was part of a strategy. It is used in warfare, it is used in boxing, it is used in political campaigns: you go fast, you go hard, you confuse your opponents and you get what you want. You appreciate that: you are an expert in strategy. That is a strategy that is used sometimes.

Morgan McSweeney: That wasn't any strategy that I deployed. When I came in as chief of staff, we had big challenges in Downing Street. We had to reset Downing Street. We had a new PPS. One of my priorities was hiring more senior staff into the building, because I thought we did not have enough experience. We had a Budget coming up, and most of my time, at that time, was completely immersed in the Budget because I think, from my recollection, we were close to OBR deadlines. These were the kind of things that I was most concerned about, not who the ambassador was. There were not detailed discussions that I remember ahead of the election, because we were waiting to see who was going to be elected.

Q981 **Chair:** Trump was elected on 5 November. What I would suggest is that, on 27 November, when Mandelson had not been elected as chancellor of Oxford, it was at that point that matters began. You have in between 27 November and 4 December, when the due diligence started, so it was very quickly after Mandelson was available as a candidate that we were doing due diligence. We did due diligence not just for Peter Mandelson but for at least another candidate as well. Is that right?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes.

Q982 **Chair:** Then we have in between 4 December, with due diligence being done, and 11 December. On 11 December, according to one of the box notes we have seen, Mandelson is now the leading candidate. What happened between 4 and 11 December for Mandelson to become the lead candidate? What happened in early December?

Morgan McSweeney: I would disagree a little bit with the sequence of events. Before consideration was given to who should be the political appointment, the first thing that had to happen was the Prime Minister himself had to decide that he wanted a political appointment, or did he want to go ahead with a civil service appointment. I did not write into that box note, I think—

Q983 **Chair:** And neither did the Prime Minister.

Morgan McSweeney: Well, I cannot speak for what he wrote and did not write. I can speak—

Q984 **Chair:** You are in charge of his office. There is no note at any stage—as far as we understand it, unless we are about to get something—of the Prime Minister making a decision that he wanted to have a political appointment. There is no note of that, or the thought process in relation to that, and then there is no note—“Oh, actually, I've now thought about it. I

want Peter Mandelson." There is no note from the Prime Minister on that either.

Morgan McSweeney: If I take each one of these decisions separately, the first decision he had to make was, did he want a political appointment or not? I did not write into that note that I thought there should be a political appointment. He would have made his decision, and he would have told his PPS what he wanted to do. And then his PPS said, "Now we need to procure candidates." So he could have gone in a different direction at that point; that would have been the end of it, and we would have gone ahead with appointing a civil servant as ambassador. So he could have gone in a different direction.

I did not have any strong disagreements with anyone in No. 10 that I can recall. Like everyone else, I could see there were pros and cons in the appointment, and I worried that it would go wrong. So I did not try to push anything through. We procured two strong candidates for him: one was Mandelson, and the other was George Osborne, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, who I had met as part of this. My view was, and I said to the Prime Minister, "You have two appointable candidates." Others agreed that there were appointable candidates. I cannot recall anyone saying that Mandelson was not appointable.

Q985 **Chair:** What happened in early December was that you went to the United States, and you went with Jonathan Powell. As far as I understand it, when you were in the United States, you were given a clear message from the Trump team that, actually, they were not keen on Peter Mandelson and that they wanted to have Karen Pierce hanging on. Did you tell the Prime Minister that? And is there a note of you telling the Prime Minister that?

Morgan McSweeney: It is half-right.

Q986 **Chair:** This is Politico on 20 March '26.

Morgan McSweeney: They did not talk to me about Mandelson. They made clear that Karen Pierce was doing a wonderful job and that they would be content with her remaining in post. But I did, as part of the process, talk to Foreign Office officials who I knew, who also approached me directly as well. I spoke to people who I knew in the US system, and I got a wide range of views, and quite a lot of views were coming back in support of Mandelson as a candidate. As I said, if the Prime Minister was hearing overwhelmingly against Mandelson, he might have made another decision, but he was getting a lot of views at the time; he was listening to people. He does listen to his senior staff, he does listen to his Ministers, before reaching a decision. So I think if it was just me arguing for it, I do not think he would have made that appointment.

Q987 **Chair:** We have that, and we also, of course, have all the stuff that has come out of the due diligence. On the box notes that I have been referring to, on 11 December it says, "Chief of Staff...has discussed candidates with you with the lead candidate being Peter Mandelson." So here he is: he is now lead candidate. How did you manage to persuade the Prime Minister

that he should be the lead candidate, given what you had heard in America and given what was in the due diligence?

Morgan McSweeney: What I had heard in America was mixed views. There were some people I spoke to there who—

Chair: You have told us that.

Morgan McSweeney: Who said that Mandelson was a strong candidate. My view is that he was the lead candidate because of his experience as an EU trade commissioner and the political skills that I thought he could bring to the table.

Q988 **Chair:** No, because it is not your opinion that is important. It is the, “Chief of Staff...has discussed candidates with you with the lead candidate being Peter Mandelson.” This is supposed to be the Prime Minister’s decision, not your decision.

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, it is the Prime Minister’s decision.

Q989 **Chair:** And it goes on, the “Chief of Staff has discussed Peter’s relationship with Jeffrey Epstein which we will go through with you, but your Director of Communications...is satisfied with his responses to questions about contacts”. Do you think it is appropriate, when doing due diligence, for you as a friend of Peter Mandelson to speak to the Prime Minister, for his responses to be measured by another friend of Peter Mandelson, Matthew Doyle, and for that information to be put before the Prime Minister as the basis upon which they can make a decision?

Morgan McSweeney: I agree, and when I look back on it, I certainly think it would have been much, much better if I had asked PET to ask those follow-up questions. I guess my thinking at the time was I had put follow-up questions to him in writing and that if a senior member of staff did that, he would feel more obligated to give the truth and the full truth. I didn’t feel that I got that back from him. But it wasn’t my decision; it was the Prime Minister’s decision, and he saw the DV as part of that decision.

Q990 **Chair:** Between 11 December, when Mandelson is the lead candidate, and writing to the King and advising him this should be the candidate, what happens? Is there a decision made at that point that Peter Mandelson should be the ambassador? And where is the note to show that the decision was made, and how the decision was made?

Morgan McSweeney: I will try to get the times as best as I possibly can, and dates, but you will have to forgive me a bit because I do not have access to my No. 10 diary or the Prime Minister’s diary.

Chair: Sure.

Morgan McSweeney: So if I make a mistake, it is not intentional. I will try to give you it as best as I can.

Chair: Yes, that is fine.



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Morgan McSweeney: I think three things are worth saying. The Prime Minister will be talking to people at that time, saying, "What do you think?" Everyone will be giving him pros and cons, that is for sure. He will take a view, a rounded view. Then the last meeting I recall, where he said, "This is the direction I want to go in," was with Nin Pandit, Jonathan Powell, me and him. After that—it might have been the same day or the day before—is when Nin Pandit wrote to Philip Barton to say, "The Prime Minister would like to make a political decision." So that was the last meeting that he had. He would have conducted that meeting the way he always does, which is to make sure everyone in the room has their view—

Q991 **Chair:** When date did you say this was? I missed it.

Morgan McSweeney: This would have been either on the day, or the day before, or a few days before Nin Pandit wrote officially to Philip Barton. When Nin Pandit wrote to Philip Barton to say, "Can we begin the necessary arrangements and get Mandelson in place"—

Q992 **Chair:** We are talking 15, 16, 17, 18 December?

Morgan McSweeney: Something around that. He would have had a meeting then. He would have said, "Right, what are we going to do here? Let me get your views," and then he would have said, "We're going to go with Mandelson."

Q993 **Chair:** During those seven days, was there an agreement between the Prime Minister and you, that what you should do is tell the King, tell the incoming President, announce the fanfare, but all of it, always, knowing that it would depend on his vetting? When this meeting was happening, was it like, "Well, we're going to do this, and we're going to do this, and we're going to do this, but obviously it's all dependent on vetting"?

Morgan McSweeney: I was not involved in any decisions about when to tell the King. I am not aware of those processes, or of the appropriate time to communicate with the King about all of this. I don't think that we discussed that. At the time, and I know Simon Case's letter has come out subsequently—I didn't see Simon Case's letter at the time, or I don't recall seeing it; I think it was directly to the Prime Minister, rather than to me and the Prime Minister—

Q994 **Chair:** But it makes sense, doesn't it? You can't appoint somebody, let alone Peter Mandelson, without vetting him first.

Morgan McSweeney: It didn't jump out as a problem to me at the time.

Q995 **Chair:** Even after the due diligence?

Morgan McSweeney: Even after the due diligence. And the reason why it didn't jump out to me is that, around about the same time—and again I cannot remember the dates—we made a political appointment for National Security Adviser, in Jonathan Powell. As far as I remember, we appointed him and then we began the DV. I was appointed before I began the DV work, and that is what tends to happen. If he had then failed, we wouldn't have sent him to DC. So it didn't occur to me to ask, because that is how I



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saw the practices being put in place. The Prime Minister is right in saying that that should not happen, and I think that he has now made a decision that that won't happen again in the future.

Q996 **Chair:** As a strategy man—let us at least look at it in this way—don't you think it is a bit odd? Essentially, what you have done is briefed the press, you have told the King and you have told the incoming President. He started being paid, and he got his pass—all these sorts of things have happened—and then you do the due diligence. If, at that point, the due diligence had said, "No, sorry, really, too risky. Can't do this," imagine the storm.

Morgan McSweeney: Sorry, no—due diligence had been done; DV—

Chair: Sorry, you are absolutely right.

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, it would have been very embarrassing for us, but may I just play an alternative scenario? At the time, it did not jump out to me as a problem: as I say, I got appointed before I completed all my necessary work; Jonathan Powell got appointed, too, before the necessary work. If Mandelson's DV had been a problem, it would have been an embarrassment for us. It would have been a much bigger problem for him. But there is an alternative scenario, which is that, say, "We're going to do DV before we talk to the palace or before we talk to the US Administration." Unfortunately, with the chances in Government of there being a leak anyway, that would have been a problem. Either way, if your lead candidate fails DV, it is embarrassing, but is far preferable to pull that candidate at that point than to go any further. If that happens to your candidate, and your candidate blows up and you have to pull them out, that is what happens. It is embarrassing to us—it would have been worse for him—but at the time, nobody said to me, "Hang on, before you announce anything at all, make sure that we do this DV first." Of course, if somebody had, I would not have questioned it—

Q997 **Chair:** But at the time, the agenda was that he is offered the job on the 20th, and he is supposed to be in Washington on 20 January, so that is just a month. During that month, there is Christmas and there is new year. All I am suggesting is that this was part of a deliberate strategy to push this as fast as it could be, in order to ensure that people could not raise any objections in the circumstances, because there simply was not time.

Morgan McSweeney: No, I don't agree with that at all. If there were problems with his DV, we would have pulled him. If we had been told that he could not get the necessary security clearance, I have no doubt the Prime Minister would have pulled him. In the event, the Foreign Office could not complete the work until after the inauguration, but the timetable was being set by the US political calendar. We wanted to wait until after the US presidential election to work out who the candidate should be, and we did want the candidate in place by the inauguration, but it was not a big deal that he wasn't in place by the inauguration; he was in place, I think it was, about two or three weeks later.



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Q998 Chair: This is my last question. Do you think that when the chance came for you to give Peter Mandelson his last job, you stopped thinking about what was best for the Government—really, you stopped thinking about what was best for the country—and you just thought, “I want to give this great job to one of my heroes,” and it became an obsession? It may be that the Prime Minister can be criticised for giving you this leeway, but it was leeway that you abused. You stopped thinking strategically, you closed your eyes to the risks, you did not consult the necessary people—the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary—and you railroaded this through as fast as you could before anyone could realise what had hit them.

Morgan McSweeney: I don’t think that is true. I certainly spoke to the then Foreign Secretary a number of times. I have a very good relationship with the Deputy Prime Minister. I have known him for very, very many years, and I would certainly have spoken to him extensively at the time. I do not regard Mandelson as a hero. I think that is an exaggeration of the kind of relationship that I had with him.

In every advice that I gave to the Prime Minister, hand on heart, I thought I was operating with a motive in the national interest. In politics, over decades, you know a lot of people. In 20 years in politics, I have had to fire friends from jobs, and I have had to turn people down who were desperate for jobs, who were closer friends of mine than Mandelson and who really wanted jobs in No. 10, or people who thought they were going to be Ministers, because I have always tried to operate in the national interest. The amount of times I have had friends come and see me or phone me, who were really angry at me, because they did not get the job that they wanted to get—that is what politics is. You have to try and always operate in the national interests.

Of course, you know people, and then you make judgments—judgments that, in this case, turned out to be wrong, incorrect. I completely accept that. But this was not some hero I was trying to get a job for. I thought his skills as an EU commissioner would help us to get the trade deal that I think the country needed, because we were very, very exposed after Brexit, and getting that trade deal right was very important. I thought he had the skills to do it; I made the wrong judgment. I completely accept that, but my motive was always in the national interest.

Chair: Aphra, you wanted to follow up, and then I am going to Sir John.

Aphra Brandreth: I have a few follow-ups.

Chair: Okay. I will go to Sir John first, and then I will go to you, if that is all right.

Q999 Sir John Whittingdale: Can I just be clear? The Prime Minister had decided that he wished to make a political appointment. Was it you who first said, “Prime Minister, I have the perfect candidate: Peter Mandelson”?

Morgan McSweeney: I think the first person who put Mandelson’s name forward was Mandelson.

Q1000 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Directly to the Prime Minister—"I want the job"?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't know whether he spoke to him. I think he talked to a lot of people, making it clear that he was interested in the job—including, I am sure, possibly even members of the press. That is where that came from. I don't remember the Prime Minister asking me for a view prior to the US election. I can't remember, but I think he was keeping his cards close to his chest and waiting to see the outcome of that election. I think that, for a Labour Administration, there would have been a broader range of candidates available to him had the Democrats won that election.

Q1001 **Sir John Whittingdale:** You have set out why you think he was well qualified to do the job, but you have also known him for a very long time. You would have also been fully aware of the fact that he had twice had to resign from the Cabinet; that he had business interests with China; that he had a close friendship with Jeffrey Epstein; and that he was also friends with Oleg Deripaska, who is a confidant of Vladimir Putin. Despite all those things, you still thought that he was the right person for the job.

Morgan McSweeney: To take each one of those in turn, after his last resignation, he had rebuilt a reasonable reputation for himself. He had gone as an EU commissioner, and as far as I was aware at the time of his appointment—I do not know what will subsequently come of its own investigations—he had a good reputation and was seen to have done a good job as EU commissioner. He then came back into British politics and served as a very senior member of Gordon Brown's premiership, or Gordon Brown's Government. Again, at the time, he was well regarded as a senior Minister in that Department. He had done these two political jobs long after his last resignation, which is why I think that a lot of the media and other politicians, at the time, thought that this was the right appointment for the country.

The nature of the relationship that I understood he had with Epstein was not a close friendship. How I understood it at the time was that it was a passing acquaintance that he regretted having, and that he apologised for. What has emerged since then was way, way, way worse than what I had expected at the time. When I saw the pictures and the Bloomberg questions in September 2025, I have to say that it was like a knife through my soul. I did not expect the level of connection that he was talking about there.

As for the other issues that you are raising, I thought that business interests would be dealt with in the Foreign Office, as people look at things like conflicts of interest. When we appointed spads who have business interests, Cabinet Office and PET would deal with that, so that would not have been something that I dealt with as chief of staff. If there was any national security issues whatsoever, my assumption was that they would be dealt with by DV, and that if there were any national security issues whatsoever, we would then be told whether there was a problem, and the Prime Minister could then pull the appointment.



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From what I knew at the time, I thought that he had re-established himself as a credible senior political figure in Europe and the Brown Government. I was not aware of the extent of the relationship that he had, and I thought that these other issues would be dealt with at other parts of the process.

Q1002 **Sir John Whittingdale:** You say that your discovery of the closeness of his relationship was like a knife to the heart, but the box note says that you discussed with Peter Mandelson his relationship with Epstein, and that you then discovered, as a result of that conversation, for instance, the fact that he stayed in the flat belonging to Jeffrey Epstein, after Epstein had been convicted for paedophile offences.

Morgan McSweeney: That was not a discovery that I made.

Q1003 **Sir John Whittingdale:** But you advised the Prime Minister of that.

Morgan McSweeney: No, that was in the DV form that was—

Sir John Whittingdale: Not DV.

Morgan McSweeney: I beg your pardon; you are right—in the due diligence form from PET. I wrote to Mandelson after the DD to understand from him, in writing, what his position was on these issues. The Met police are using the email that I sent to Mandelson, and his responses from that, as part of their investigation. When I was in No. 10, I was told that we could not share those questions, the answers to those questions or the email itself with the media or as part of the Humble Address process until the police had finished with it, because they said that that would interfere with their investigation. So I have stuck to that since I left Downing Street.

Q1004 **Sir John Whittingdale:** But in your conversation with the Prime Minister about Peter Mandelson's relationship with Epstein, was the subject of Mandelson's staying in Epstein's flat after the conviction part of the conversation?

Morgan McSweeney: It is hard to answer that directly without saying what was in the content of the emails, but my understanding at the time—I could maybe say what my understanding was from hearing him talk about it and listening to his friends. My understanding at the time was that his relationship was as a passing acquaintance that he knew through somebody else. The way he described it was that he realised that it was a mistake, he deeply regretted it and he broke it off many, many years before. He was not advocating for the guy or defending the guy in any way. You take all of these things into consideration. What then emerged as the relationship in September last year was not the relationship that I was led to understand. It was very, very different.

Q1005 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Can I ask about the two notes that went to the Prime Minister from the private office about the appointment? In each case—they have been released under the Humble Address process—they are completely blank, other than the submission. There is no



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comment. The Prime Minister has not indicated any view. I have worked in Downing Street. Box notes go up, and then come back down with a comment. It may only be a tick, but there is something to indicate that the Prime Minister has taken a decision. In this case, there is nothing to indicate that the Prime Minister has taken a decision. Why not?

Morgan McSweeney: I can't answer the question. The box notes usually come back into the civil service, and then I get informed what the decision is. He may, and sometimes he did, do it verbally, but I cannot answer why there was not anything in the box. I would make submissions into the box, the same as the other special advisers. They would be collated by his PPS, they would go to the Prime Minister, and then the Prime Minister would send them back through the system. I did not ask to see the box note. I would sometimes ask to see a box note if I was unsure what the decision was, or if I wanted to understand a bit more about his thinking, but generally speaking, I just took whatever the civil service said. But I do not know why he didn't tick. Maybe he spoke to his team.

Q1006 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Well, that is the alternative: that he did not indicate in writing, but said, "I would like to have a meeting to discuss this." But if such a meeting took place, there would be a record of it, and no record has been released.

Morgan McSweeney: Again, I cannot answer as to why that was. I was not the person who was keeping records, but in terms of his decisions, I would always make sure, in any decision, including any of this, that the PPS would always be present to be able to give her views and to make sure decisions were properly recorded. But I was not the minute taker. I was not—

Q1007 **Sir John Whittingdale:** So how did you discover that the Prime Minister had decided to go ahead with Peter Mandelson?

Morgan McSweeney: I believe, from my best recollection, that there was a meeting in mid-December, and he told us that that is what he wanted to do. Then Nin Pandit took his decision and passed that on to Philip Barton.

Q1008 **Sir John Whittingdale:** A meeting took place, which led to the private secretary writing to say that that was the decision. Is there a record of that meeting?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't know; I don't have access to that information any more.

Q1009 **Chair:** But it was your job to make sure that the minutes of meetings were taken.

Morgan McSweeney: No.

Q1010 **Chair:** So you were in charge of his office, but you were not in charge of there being records made of any decisions made in the office?

Morgan McSweeney: No, the civil service will take responsibility for that side of things. My job was to make sure that he had the political input, but when I was in meetings, private secretaries would take notes. How those

notes were recorded and circulated, I did not ask around the detail of that, but I always assumed that they would be properly recorded and shared with the appropriate people.

Q1011 Aphra Brandreth: I want to go back over some of the questions that the Chair asked you. I will ask some follow-ups and seek some clarification on some of them. You said that you were out in the States at the start of December prior to the appointment being made. When you were out there, in the offline conversations that you were having, did anyone raise with you concerns that they had about Mandelson's business links with China?

Morgan McSweeney: No.

Q1012 Aphra Brandreth: Okay. Thinking about the security vetting, we heard from Sir Philip Barton that there was no contingency plan in place in case security clearance was not granted to Peter Mandelson. Had you considered the possibility that clearance would be denied, and had you put any contingency plan in place?

Morgan McSweeney: I did not have a contingency plan in place, but I was always aware that somebody could fail security vetting. I was always aware that that was a possibility for any appointment that we made, yes.

Q1013 Aphra Brandreth: Aware, but did you consider it? Did you actively think this could happen in this case?

Morgan McSweeney: No, and if it had happened, we would have withdrawn the ambassadorship. It would have been a political embarrassment, and then we would have gone on—it is hard to guess, but we would have asked Karen Pierce, I think, to stay on, probably, and then we would have thought about what would be the next steps.

Q1014 Aphra Brandreth: You clearly felt that Peter Mandelson was the right person for the job. You had recommended him to the Prime Minister, although you have said that you believe that the Prime Minister would have sought a wide range of opinions. Despite the fact that you ultimately resigned over your advice to the Prime Minister, would you say that he was the person in full knowledge of all the information and who made the decision to appoint Mandelson to that role?

Morgan McSweeney: He had all the knowledge that I had, but I do not know what other knowledge—this is part of what the Committee is looking at—or what he should have otherwise been told or not told. But he had all the knowledge that I had, yes.

Q1015 Aphra Brandreth: And he was the one who ultimately will have made the decision, not being persuaded or doing what somebody else wanted him to do?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, the Prime Minister takes the decision.

Q1016 Aphra Brandreth: Sir Oliver Robbins, the former permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, has lost his job. When the PM was asked, he said that he did not accept the explanation as to why he



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overruled the verdict of security vetting, and that is why he sacked him. Do you think that somebody should be sacked for an error of judgment?

Morgan McSweeney: If I could add one last thing to your previous question, if that is okay, the Prime Minister was aware of everything that I was aware of. But he was not aware of enough—not because of advisers or civil servants, but because Mandelson himself was not open enough with him. That really is the big problem in all of this: had Mandelson said, “This is everything,” and defended himself on the truth, I do not think that he would have come close to being appointed.

The Prime Minister did not have enough information because Mandelson did not share the necessary information with him. He had ample opportunity to do so, and did not, and that is where—above all else—this was let down. If he had been honest like any other person—the thing that I always thought about Mandelson was that he cared about his party and he loved his country, so I banked that he would at least be honest with his Prime Minister in such a post, and I think that is really where this was let down. I do not think that the Prime Minister had all the necessary information to make the decision. Sorry, I beg your pardon, I have now forgotten your next question.

Aphra Brandreth: That is okay. Thank you for your answer on that. I must say, it appeared to me that there was a significant amount of information that had come forward in the due diligence, but I think there may be some questions from others on that, so I won’t push on that now.

My question was about Sir Oliver Robbins and the decision by the Prime Minister to sack him. I wanted to know, given the reasoning that the Prime Minister gave in the Chamber, do you think that someone should be sacked for an error of judgment?

Morgan McSweeney: I can’t really comment on what happened with Sir Olly. I had left Downing Street at the time. But I know how the Prime Minister works, and I think, whatever decision he takes, he will always have been weighing up everything, including listening to people. But I can’t really comment on that decision, because I had left Downing Street at the time.

Q1017 **Aphra Brandreth:** You think that he will have sought sufficient information—that he wouldn’t have needed to carry out a fuller investigation, and perhaps suspend rather than immediately sack him from the job?

Morgan McSweeney: I can’t say what he did and didn’t do, because it was after my time in Downing Street, so I am not privy to any of this information, but how the Prime Minister works—yes, I think he would have got the necessary information before reaching a conclusion.

Q1018 **Aphra Brandreth:** I just want to check—you talked about the process that Jonathan Powell had gone through, as far as you understood, in terms of going through developed vetting before he took up the political appointment of being National Security Adviser. I understand that, prior to

that, he was already a special envoy to the British Indian Ocean Territory. Would he not have had developed vetting in that role?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't know.

Q1019 **Aphra Brandreth:** I have a couple of final questions in relation to Matthew Doyle. We heard from Sir Oliver Robbins that the Prime Minister had inquired, as I am sure you are aware, about a diplomatic role for Matthew Doyle. Why do you think that the Prime Minister did not want David Lammy, who was the Foreign Secretary at the time, to be told about that request and those inquiries?

Morgan McSweeney: What was happening at the time was that it was clear that Matthew Doyle's time in government was coming to an end. The Prime Minister wanted me, as part of that, to discuss with Matthew Doyle next steps. These are difficult conversations. The Prime Minister wanted me to convey to him that if he had wanted to stay in government, that he should consider doing so, because he had extensive experience in government.

The private office asked what vacancies there were that Matthew Doyle might apply for. There was no suggestion at any point that he would be imposed in them. If he had wanted to work in the Foreign Office, Matthew Doyle would have had to apply for any of those posts, the same as anybody else. It wasn't my email, but I am sure the reason why the private office said, "Please don't discuss this with anyone, including the Foreign Secretary," is because this is a delicate HR issue—somebody is leaving their job and you don't want a lot of people knowing it.

In the event, it wasn't something that was taken very seriously. It was as Matthew Doyle was leaving, and I'm having that conversation with him. People don't really engage in that conversation, because it is a tough thing. I would have said to him, "There are jobs coming up in the Foreign Office that you might be interested in, such as these kinds of things," but he didn't actually engage in that. He didn't seek to apply. He said he wasn't interested in any of that.

He was in a senior job as director of communications. My understanding at the time was that it wasn't unprecedented for spads to apply for and get foreign policy jobs, such as Ed Llewellyn under the previous Conservative Government, but it wasn't something that we talked about a great deal. He didn't apply for any of those jobs.

For reassurance, he would have had to apply, the same as anyone else, and had he said he wanted to apply, absolutely at that point the Foreign Secretary would have been involved in that conversation. But the reason why the private office didn't want it shared around was because it was a sensitive issue for exiting somebody from their job.

Q1020 **Chair:** If your answer is that he would have to apply in answer to an advert like anyone else, like the equal opportunities policy says, then why does anybody need to ring anybody else up?



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Morgan McSweeney: Because the Prime Minister wanted to say to Matthew Doyle, "Look, you've done a good job, but we have to change the direction that we are going in in comms. There are other jobs coming up." It was more about a softer landing. There was no suggestion in any conversation that anyone had with me that there was a desire to impose him into any job. All I said to him when he was leaving was, "Look, there are these jobs coming up. Would you be interested in them?" But he wasn't, so that was the end of the conversation.

The only reason to keep the circle of people knowing limited was because there was an HR issue, and we just do not want to have those wider discussions; you want to have those discussions with as few people as possible. I do not think that this was a big conversation with anyone. I think that it was all very much the Prime Minister saying, "Look, can you have this with him?" Well, he wanted to—they are difficult conversations. He wanted Matthew Doyle to be able to land on his feet somewhere, and he wanted to encourage him to apply for the next thing. A part of that is telling people, "Look, there is time to move on, but there are other opportunities out there."

Q1021 **Aphra Brandreth:** You say that it was not a big conversation, but it obviously went to the head of the diplomatic service, so that is quite a senior conversation to be having. In your answer, you said that you believe that it was not told to David Lammy, the Foreign Secretary at the time, because it was a sensitive HR issue. Are you aware of any other discussions between No. 10, the Foreign Office and the permanent under-secretary, whether it was Sir Oliver Robbins or Sir Philip Barton, in which the Prime Minister or No. 10 asked for the Foreign Secretary not to be involved in the discussion?

Morgan McSweeney: No.

Q1022 **Aphra Brandreth:** How involved would you say the Foreign Secretary was at the time in that decision to appoint Mandelson as the ambassador?

Morgan McSweeney: He certainly would have had several conversations with the Prime Minister. I had conversations with him. I do not know who else he had conversations with.

Q1023 **Chair:** And he was fine about it, was he?

Morgan McSweeney: Nobody was fine about it. Everyone could see that there were risks. Like everybody else, he would have flagged that there are risks. I do not want to share with the Committee what conclusions people came to, because I think that it is for other people to say—

Q1024 **Chair:** You were there. There are no notes. We are just trying to understand how these decisions are made. You have the Foreign Secretary here, at a meeting, and you are discussing whether or not Britain should send Peter Mandelson as ambassador to Washington. I do not see what is wrong with you telling us whether the Foreign Secretary thought it was a good idea or not.



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Morgan McSweeney: I cannot remember precisely what people said—

Q1025 **Chair:** Don't tell us word for word. Did he say, "Okay, yes. Let's do it," or did he say, "Actually, I've got reservations"?

Morgan McSweeney: Like everybody else, he could see that there were cons and risks. I had reservations too. Like everybody else, he would have had reservations. He would have discussed them iteratively with the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister would have taken the Foreign Secretary's views very seriously. He is somebody he is close to politically; obviously he appointed him afterwards as Deputy Prime Minister in that reshuffle—you were asking about that earlier. The then Foreign Secretary, the current Deputy Prime Minister, is somebody the Prime Minister is close to, and he would have got his views. He would have also got the views of senior staff and other Ministers. The Prime Minister would not have dismissed any of those people's views and would have taken them in the round before making a final decision—

Q1026 **Chair:** Let me try one more time. Did the Foreign Secretary say, "I think this is a bad idea"?

Morgan McSweeney: Not to me.

Chair: Okay.

Q1027 **Edward Morello:** I want to quickly go back to your presentation of the conversation with Matthew Doyle: that if there were upcoming ambassadorial posts in the Foreign Office, he should consider applying for them. Can you see how, if you were Matthew Doyle and had just seen the Prime Minister ram Peter Mandelson down the throat of the FCDO despite all the obvious problems, that might feel like a job offer? Even if it was how you characterised it, you would surely be sitting there thinking, "That seems like a pretty locked-on job if I want it."

Morgan McSweeney: I do not think that the Prime Minister conducted himself in the way you are suggesting. He was told by the Cabinet Secretary that he was allowed to make a political appointment and he made his political decision about who he thought the candidate should be. It is then for the machine to implement the Prime Minister's decision. That is certainly not the way I would have put it to Matthew Doyle when he was leaving. I would not have said that, and I would not have needed to say it.

Edward Morello: No, you wouldn't have because he would have been sitting there thinking, "Well, if I want the job I am definitely going to get it because the Prime Minister got Peter Mandelson one."

Morgan McSweeney: I certainly do not agree with that. This was about a duty of care to somebody who was leaving and saying to them, "There are other opportunities out there." In the end, he did not ask for any follow-up on that, but I would not have said to him, "We're going to move you from this to this," or, "Whatever job you want is yours." I certainly would not have said that to him. It was the same when other people were leaving. You would say to them, "Look, there might be other opportunities in the future," but—



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Q1028 **Chair:** Have you heard the phrase “jobs for the boys”? This is so far from any equal opportunities policies that I have ever heard of. Do you not think this is a little odd, or shameful?

Morgan McSweeney: Well, the same was true if we had to exit senior women from the team. We would have said to them, “If you want to stay in Government”—and some did—

Q1029 **Chair:** Like Sue Gray?

Morgan McSweeney: I do not want to—

Chair: I’m just saying, you are talking about senior women, so what job was she given, for example?

Morgan McSweeney: Sue Gray is now in the House of Lords. Matthew Doyle was not promised a job. Had he applied for the job then the Foreign Office would have considered his application the same as anyone else’s. The equalities and all the other necessary procedures would have had to follow in any direction—

Q1030 **Edward Morello:** That is not what Sir Olly Robbins told us. Sir Olly Robbins told us that Matthew Doyle’s name was another one floated as a political appointee. Given that when the Prime Minister politically appointed Mandelson it was a lock, it would be fair to assume, if you are Matthew Doyle, that effectively a similar guarantee was being made to him.

Morgan McSweeney: I was not asked to and I did not send that email to him. It was the opposite of “jobs for the boys”; he was losing his job. All I said to him was, “There might be other opportunities.” It was never followed up and I was not told by anybody—not by the Prime Minister or the private office—“You need to go and promise him a job.” It was just a simple duty of care conversation: “You are leaving your job. There are other opportunities in the future. Do you want to explore them?” The answer was, “No,” and that was the end of the conversation.

Q1031 **Abtisam Mohamed:** I want to take us back to a couple of questions that the Chair asked earlier in relation to Matthew Doyle. In the note to the Prime Minister on 11 December, the “Director of Communications” is recorded as saying of Peter Mandelson that he was “satisfied with his responses to questions about contact” with Epstein. Matthew Doyle was the director of communications; did you trust his judgment, given what we know about Matthew Doyle?

Morgan McSweeney: “Trust his judgment, given what we know”—I beg your pardon?

Abtisam Mohamed: Did you trust Matthew Doyle’s judgment in relation to that particular—that he was “satisfied with his responses to questions” in relation to Mandelson’s contact with Epstein?

Morgan McSweeney: Matthew Doyle submitted his view to the Prime Minister and it would have been for the Prime Minister to decide whether



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he took that view on board or not. In terms of what I did, I gave the answers and ran through the answers with the Prime Minister, but I did not put a lot of weight on my own judgment of what Matthew Doyle thought at the time.

Q1032 *Abtisam Mohamed:* Okay. There was a fact-finding call between the general counsel to the Prime Minister and Matthew Doyle, in which Matthew Doyle is reflecting back on some of the conversations. It was noted in the call that Lord Mandelson is a personal friend of Matthew Doyle, that Matthew Doyle had a number of conversations with you, many of which were one to one, and that there was quite a lot of “back and forth” that resulted in three specific questions. What were those questions?

Morgan McSweeney: They were all questions that came from wanting clarification around the due diligence report. On the point of who should have been asking those questions, it is my view now that we should have asked PET to ask them.

Q1033 *Abtisam Mohamed:* What were the themes of those three questions?

Morgan McSweeney: They were questions in relation to the due diligence report. The police have now got that email, as do the Government and No. 10. At the time when I was in No. 10, I was told that the police did not want the questions or their answers released. They will be released as part of the Humble Address process, when the police are finished with them. Until then, I do not feel I can say what the questions were.

Q1034 *Abtisam Mohamed:* Given the scale of the appointment, do you think that three questions were sufficient to interrogate Mandelson?

Morgan McSweeney: I think if somebody is being honest with you, the questions would be sufficient. If somebody is deliberately hiding something, then, whether you ask three, five or however many questions, I am not sure you would get to the bottom of it. For purposes of appearances—and public appearances are important in this—I regret that I did not ask PET to carry out those questions, but I am not sure that they would have got better answers, given how he chose to answer the questions. I am not sure they would have got better answers at all.

My hope at the time—or my thinking at the time, at least—was that we would ask him these questions and he should answer honestly. If he did not answer them honestly, neither I nor PET had investigatory powers, but there were two other mechanisms that I thought might catch a problem. One was that he had been such a public figure for so long and had had such media scrutiny—he had actually worked for the media—that if he said something to me that the media later uncovered, there would be gaps. I also thought that DV would expose it if there were any further risks. I thought that those were the other next steps where there were some safeguards in place.



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If somebody is not fully truthful in their answers to questions, then if a different person had been asking them or if they had asked more questions—I am not sure; it is hard to tell, and we do not know. But with hindsight, I wish that I had asked PET to ask those questions.

Q1035 **Chair:** Did you put those questions in writing?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes.

Q1036 **Chair:** So is your evidence that you put those questions in writing because you thought that Mandelson was more obligated to tell the truth if he had to write it down?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, and so I had a record as well.

Q1037 **Chair:** Does that mean that you advised the Prime Minister that you did not think that Mandelson had told you the full truth about Epstein?

Morgan McSweeney: No, I did not say that to him.

Q1038 **Chair:** What did you say? Would you say that the Prime Minister thought, "Well, if there is a serious problem, the DV will pick it up"?

Morgan McSweeney: No, I did not say that if there was a serious problem, the DV will pick it up.

Q1039 **Chair:** No, but either you thought that Mandelson was lying to you about Epstein, and presumably you told the Prime Minister that, or you or the Prime Minister thought, "Well okay, he's lied, but the DV will pick it up so that will cover us at that point."

Morgan McSweeney: No, I thought he had told the truth. I thought that if he had written to me and set it out the way he did, he would have told the truth. That was a mistake.

Q1040 **Chair:** Right—so you thought he had lied before but then told the truth when he wrote it.

Morgan McSweeney: No, I did not think he had lied. I thought he had told the truth, and that was the basis on which we were going ahead, but I also thought that if I was wrong and he had been lying—I thought he told the truth, which is why I felt we should proceed—that that might be picked up at DV.

Q1041 **Chair:** And whatever he wrote, he essentially assured you that any allegations about him staying at Epstein's house when Epstein was in jail were all fine.

Morgan McSweeney: Again, I do not think I can share the contents of the emails, and the questions and his answers, but when he wrote back to me, I assumed, wrongly, that he was telling me the truth.

Q1042 **Abtisam Mohamed:** I come on to another fact-finding call, this time with Jonathan Powell. He is recorded as saying that he raised concerns directly with yourself in relation to the reputation of Mandelson. You responded to him saying that "the issues had been addressed." What

issues had been addressed?

Morgan McSweeney: I do not recall that conversation. Like everyone else, Jonathan Powell was saying that there were pros and cons, but I do not recall that conversation.

Q1043 **Abtisam Mohamed:** You do not recall any issues being addressed.

Morgan McSweeney: No.

Q1044 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Okay. I will take us now to areas of conflicts of interest in the due diligence checklist. You said earlier that nothing jumped out at the due diligence stage, and that you were not aware of the extent of the problem. Did you look in detail at the due diligence checklist that was provided?

Morgan McSweeney: There were things that jumped out as a problem, but nothing jumped out to me as a problem with regard to that we hadn't done the DV yet. I assumed the DV process would happen following the Prime Minister's decision. It didn't jump out at me that it was public that that was who the Prime Minister's preferred candidate was before we did the DV. On conflict of interests, my assumption was that that would be picked up with the Foreign Office when he was being employed, because when we had spads appointed who had business interests, that would be picked up by the Cabinet Office and not dealt with at a political level.

Q1045 **Abtisam Mohamed:** In the due diligence checklist, under professional financial relationships, it says that the retained role and interest in Global Counsel would have to cease—come to an end. Did you make sure that this took place, or at any point did you question that?

Morgan McSweeney: I left all that to the Foreign Office, because that is not my skillset or expertise. I wouldn't even know how to manage that.

Q1046 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Okay. Then, in relation to reputational risks, earlier you referenced that nothing jumped out at the due diligence stage. Did you have the chance to read the 2019 report commissioned by JP Morgan?

Morgan McSweeney: Again, it did jump out at me that this was a problem. What didn't jump out as a problem was that we had yet to do DV. I can't recall reading it, no, but I recall thinking that this is a problem and we need to ask some follow-up questions.

Q1047 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Okay, so questions were asked in relation to the JP Morgan report, but not enough to cause serious concern.

Morgan McSweeney: It wasn't the volume of questions—I don't think that was the problem. It was the nature of the answers and the lack of honesty.

Q1048 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Have you read the emails between Mandelson and Epstein in the JP Morgan report?

Morgan McSweeney: I can't recall reading them.

Q1049 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Okay. I will reference some of them. These are all in the public domain and were from 2019. Epstein says, “was Petie helpful?” That is in relation to the intention to sell a Government asset. Epstein emailed Mandelson saying, “I like to see my suggestions come to fruition.” In 2010, Mandelson shares the guestlist for an event he is speaking at in Shanghai. There is another email from 2010 where Mandelson emails about Russian businesses. Were none of those emails brought to your attention as a serious red flag?

Morgan McSweeney: No.

Q1050 **Abtisam Mohamed:** If these were not part of the due diligence process, did the Prime Minister have any understanding of the depth of concern that was raised in the JP Morgan report?

Morgan McSweeney: He read the due diligence file. I don’t know precisely what his overall views on it were.

Q1051 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Nobody thought to bring the content of the report to the Prime Minister as well.

Morgan McSweeney: Other than what I think he saw, not that I know of.

Q1052 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Do you not think that was a failing in your role as the chief of staff to bring it to the Prime Minister?

Morgan McSweeney: I think that I would have expected due diligence to produce all the content that was available out there, and not for me to run a parallel process to look for other due diligence, so I didn’t add my own further investigation to it.

Q1053 **Abtisam Mohamed:** It was all in the public domain, so this is everything that the general public would have known. So was this not serious enough to require you to first of all look into the evidence, and secondly, report it to the Prime Minister?

Morgan McSweeney: I didn’t carry out any further investigations, and looking back on it I think that the DD process was surprisingly inadequate. When we came into government, we had introduced adding DD to appointments of spads—special advisers—which was not there before. We started to use other spads to do it, because the process wasn’t good enough, generally speaking. This report, I think, was insufficient. Should I have asked further questions of the report compiling team? I think that is fair; I think I should have.

Q1054 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Final question from me. You said it was wrong to appoint Mandelson. Why is it wrong now, but it was right back then?

Morgan McSweeney: I think the reason why I thought it was right then was because of his experience as an EU commissioner. I think what came out in September last year, with the Bloomberg emails, the pictures and later revelations from the Epstein files, shows that the nature of the relationship that he had meant that he was unfit for the job.

Q1055 **Chair:** I want to have another go at an answer that you gave,



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because I do feel as though you have contradicted it. I have got a note: "my thinking at the time was I had put follow-up questions to him in writing and that if a senior member of staff did that, he would feel more obligated to give the truth and the full truth. I didn't feel that I got that back from him. But it wasn't my decision; it was the Prime Minister's decision, and he saw the DV as part of that decision."

Morgan McSweeney: Sorry, let me correct myself. In September, I realised I did not get the truth back from him. At the time, I thought I had got the truth back from him. When I saw the emails and the pictures that came out and that were published from the Epstein files in September last year, that is when it really dawned on me that I did not get the full truth from him. At the time, I thought he was telling the truth. If I did not think that he was telling the truth, I would have said, "This guy is not telling me the truth." But I did think he was telling the truth, and that was wrong.

Q1056 **Chair:** So, "I didn't feel that I got that back from him. But it wasn't my decision; it was the Prime Minister's". You did not mean any of that?

Morgan McSweeney: No, I didn't feel that I got the truth back from him in September last year. Sorry, I might have mumbled my words. I got the answers back from him, I thought that he was telling the truth, and when I gave that to the Prime Minister, I did so on the basis that Mandelson had answered truthfully. That was in December, and in September last year, it became clear to me that he had not told the truth.

Q1057 **Edward Morello:** Apologies if we are going over the same point here, but for the point of clarity, the due diligence report is produced by the Cabinet Office. You received that. Did the Prime Minister receive the full unredacted due diligence report, or did you summarise it, or did you brief him orally? What did the Prime Minister receive?

Morgan McSweeney: He received the whole report.

Q1058 **Edward Morello:** He received the full report. Did you discuss the contents of the report with him?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, I believe so.

Q1059 **Edward Morello:** Did that conversation happen at a point at which he had read the report? There is a difference between receiving the report and reading it, I guess.

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, he would have read the report. He read all these papers.

Q1060 **Edward Morello:** Did he raise any reservations with you during that discussion?

Morgan McSweeney: I can't remember particularly which ones, if he did.

Q1061 **Edward Morello:** You wrote some clarification emails to Peter Mandelson and received those replies. Did those responses go to the Prime Minister?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes.

Q1062 **Edward Morello:** And did you discuss those responses with him?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, we did discuss those responses with him and, again, he would have considered them in the round.

Q1063 **Edward Morello:** Okay. Did he express any reservations at that point about the appointment of Peter Mandelson?

Morgan McSweeney: I cannot remember what he said.

Q1064 **Edward Morello:** You have talked about there being pros and cons to the appointment of Peter Mandelson. When you spoke to Jonathan Powell, you said that he raised pros and cons. When you spoke to David Lammy, he raised pros and cons. Outside of Peter Mandelson himself, is there anyone who was not raising any cons? Were there any out-and-out advocates for Peter?

Morgan McSweeney: No, but the same is true of quite a lot of appointments.

Q1065 **Edward Morello:** What is true?

Morgan McSweeney: That people have cons.

Q1066 **Edward Morello:** I guess I am going back to what you said earlier, which is that the Prime Minister talks to lots of people before coming to the decision himself, but so far, everyone who you have listed seems to be on the fence as to whether or not Peter Mandelson was a good appointment or worth the risk.

How do you get to the point where you have got two candidates—this is not to speak to the appropriateness of George Osborne in any way, shape or form—one of whom absolutely everyone you speak to says, “Well, it’s a coin toss on that one.” How does that end up being the candidate?

Morgan McSweeney: What I have not said is what conclusion each individual person came to, in part because I do not remember precisely and I do not want to unfairly represent anyone else’s views. Not only would people have said, “I think there are pros and cons,” but they would have said, “And this is what I think we should do.” The Prime Minister would have got a range of views, and he would have concluded based on the range of views which way he was going to go. He would not have put up with people saying, “On the one hand, and then on the other, so I’m going to sit on the fence.” He would have said, “Well, what’s your view? What do you think we should do?” Then he would have got all those views and reached a decision.

In the aftermath, I understand why people are mostly focusing on the cons that were raised, but I can tell you that there is no way the Prime Minister would just accept one person’s view as being pro a candidate if everyone else had been against it.

Q1067 **Chair:** Even if it had been you?

Morgan McSweeney: Even if it had been me—absolutely. The Prime Minister has his own mind. He reaches his own decisions. Sometimes he



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takes advice from me and will go with it. Sometimes when I was there, he didn't. All these other people that you are talking about are close confidants of the Prime Minister and people whose judgment he trusts and respects—people like Jonathan Powell and David Lammy. These are senior staff that he has in No. 10. These are people he takes very, very seriously.

Sometimes, as an adviser, you give advice and a Prime Minister goes with you. That is what happened this time, and I am taking responsibility for that advice. There were other times where I would say, "I think we should go in this direction," and the Prime Minister would say, "No, I've got a different view," "I've got a different candidate," or, "I don't like your candidate," and go in a different direction. In a situation where I want to go in one direction and senior Cabinet members want to go in another direction, he is more likely to weight it with those Cabinet members. It depends on each individual situation. Keir Starmer is not somebody who just takes one person's view before going with it. He is a considerate Prime Minister. He takes on views. He respects the views of people like the current Deputy Prime Minister, the current National Security Adviser and his senior staff. He would have taken those views very, very seriously.

Q1068 Richard Foord: Thank you, Mr McSweeney, for coming before the Committee today. I would like to ask a few questions about communication between No. 10 and the Foreign Office. It was rumoured last autumn that the communication between you and Sir Olly Robbins was assertive and emphatic—sweary, even. You have denied that. How did you communicate to the FCDO the desire from No. 10 to speed up the approval of Mandelson's developed vetting?

Morgan McSweeney: Thank you. I am glad to have the opportunity to answer this. I am, first, very, very grateful to Sir Philip Barton for what he said about this swearing rumour. It is something that has caused me a great deal of stress for a number of months. I don't know why people do this in politics—put around untrue rumours. They phone lots of journalists. Those journalists then phone lots of politicians. That is how rumours get around. It is very, very corrosive. It is damaging for people's reputation. A lot of people in No. 10 get that. I think it is unfair for staff who cannot speak for themselves.

I am grateful as well to the journalists, the vast majority of whom never covered that story, because it was not true. I am so glad that Sir Philip Barton said today that I did not phone him and that he has no recollection of me swearing at him. I have no recollection of swearing at him either. I denied it when I was repeatedly asked about it by journalists. Most journalists did not touch the story and showed a lot of integrity on that. I think it is one of the most corrosive things that happens in politics, so I am glad I got the chance to set the record straight. I did not swear at Sir Philip Barton.

I did not swear at Sir Olly Robbins either. In his testimony, he said that I didn't call him, I didn't text him and I didn't email him. I was not talking to Sir Olly Robbins about this issue. Because of what has happened, we are rightly all focusing on precisely what happened with this appointment, but



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I can tell you that in January 2025, this was not one of my most important issues. There were far more serious issues affecting the Government and the country in January 2025 than the start date of an ambassador. That was not my priority at all. That was not the issue that kept me awake at night. If I was talking to officials at all, generally, at that level, it would not have been about this issue.

It is important that we unpack this idea of pressure, because there has been a lot of conversation about it. There is pressure in Government every day, and most of that pressure comes from inside you. Every civil servant, Minister and spad I worked with woke up, every morning, feeling pressure to make the country better—wanting to move faster. The challenges the country faces are great. That is where the pressure comes from, and rightly so.

No. 10's job, in all of this, is to make sure that the Prime Minister's decisions are acted on quickly. There is a real difference between asking people to act at pace and asking people to lower standards, and we never did that; we never asked people to skip steps at any part of the process.

I didn't speak—I don't think I spoke—to Olly Robbins about the appointment or the start date. I think I had a conversation—at least one, maybe two—with Philip Barton, but it was on a wider Zoom call; as he said, it wasn't on a phone call. It was all about, "Can we do this at pace?", not, "Can we do anything improper?"

Q1069 Richard Foord: Accepting the point that your communication was not directly with Sir Olly, we know from Sir Olly's testimony that there was communication from No. 10 to the Foreign Office, even if it did not include you both individually. So who in No. 10 was applying this pressure that Sir Olly described?

Morgan McSweeney: The private office at No. 10 chased the appropriate Department every day on decisions that the Prime Minister would have made. There would have been occasions where I would have asked, "Where are we with this decision?" But, as a priority of No. 10, in our daily meetings, the start date of Mandelson was not something that was regularly on the agenda; it would have been sometimes.

What happens is that the Prime Minister takes a decision and then the private office will chase another private office. If it is a political issue—if there is a political barrier—then spads will chase spads, or, occasionally, it might elevate to talking to Ministers about what is going on in the Department.

In this case, the No. 10 private office would have chased the Foreign Office private office to see when this was happening. But none of the chasing would have been asking to skip steps. I think that is very important because we are talking about national security, and every single person that I worked with in No. 10 took national security very, very seriously. Everyone there knew what was at stake with national security and would not have played hard and fast with national security.

Q1070 Richard Foord: I just want to repeat back to you a couple of lines from Sir Olly's testimony to this Committee last week. He said: "my strong sense that there was an atmosphere of pressure and a certain dismissiveness about this DV process". Separately, he said: "Throughout January, honestly, my office and the Foreign Secretary's office were under constant pressure." Do you refute that?

Morgan McSweeney: Like I said, I would like to unpack the two elements of pressure here; we're on pressure to try and get decisions implemented. Our preference in No. 10 was that Mandelson was in post for the inauguration, and we wanted him in post for the inauguration because it was an opportunity to meet the new incoming Administration and other key figures in DC.

In the event, the Foreign Office were unable to get him in post by then. He did not start for three weeks later, so they could not deliver on that timetable and it wasn't the end of the world for us; it wasn't a big deal. Our preference was 20 January; I believe he started on 10 February—sometime around then, two or three weeks later. So we did not get the timetable that we wanted, but we wanted it to be done quickly.

I worry that this conversation that is happening—and it is right that it is happening, because people need to understand what is happening—is bringing together two things that are completely separate. Yes, we wanted it done quickly, but at no point, at any point in No. 10, did I witness anyone being dismissive about DV or national security.

Q1071 Richard Foord: But that pressure around the timeline may have been misinterpreted as pressure for an outcome. How would you reconcile the pressure that Sir Olly described last week with the Prime Minister having stated at Prime Minister's questions last week that, "No pressure existed whatsoever in relation to this case"?

Morgan McSweeney: The Prime Minister was saying that there was no pressure in relation to vetting. I don't think I ever had a conversation with a senior official about anyone's vetting. As Ian Collard said in his letter, he didn't think it had any impact on the outcome of their vetting.

I think there is a world of difference between saying, "We want to go quicker," and, "We want to be reckless." There is a world of difference between saying to a taxi driver, "I'm late for a plane," and, "Can you break all the red lights and go speeding?" There is a world of difference between those things: one is proper—No. 10 saying, "We want things done quickly", which the people of this country should want—and the other is wholly improper—No. 10 saying, "We want steps to be skipped."

Q1072 Chair: You are talking about red lights. The pressure put on civil servants, potentially, meant that they missed two red lights on page 10 of the summary form that said they recommended that he did not pass DV. According to Olly Robbins, he didn't see it, and according to Ian Collard, he didn't see it, so both of them missed those red lights. Is it not because of pressure being put on them?

Morgan McSweeney: That is not what either the testimony from Sir Olly Robbins or Ian Collard's letter said. My understanding is that he said that he does not assess that pressure affected the outcome. I thought that is what he said.

Q1073 **Chair:** You are the one who raised red lights and cab drivers. Both of them missed the red lights and both of them missed the green, orange and red—neither of them can tell us they saw those two things. It seems to me to be fairly clear evidence that the DV was making a fairly strong recommendation, and yet we hear that both of them seem to think it was a borderline case, leaning towards not.

Morgan McSweeney: Sir Olly made his assessment and would have carried out the processes in the way he saw fit. I cannot comment about the way the DV process worked. I am only learning about the DV process in real time, watching these interviews and watching this Committee's work. What I can say is that nobody in No. 10 ever thought it would be acceptable to skip steps. Yes, we want to move quickly, but that does not and should never involve making decisions that put national security at risk.

I have not seen anything in Sir Olly's testimony or Ian Collard's letter that suggests they did not follow proper procedures. They are saying they did follow proper procedures. Why they missed them needs to be part of how we draw the lessons from this, but they are not saying that they did anything improper, and nobody is saying they were asked to do anything improper.

You have heard from Sir Philip Barton, you have had the letter from Ian Collard, Sir Olly Robbins and Cat Little. These are all brilliant people; none of them said they were asked to do anything improper. From everybody I know in Downing Street, private office people would not ask other private offices to do anything improper—these are serious people who worry about national security.

Q1074 **Fleur Anderson:** Thank you for coming in to see us today. I am going to take you back to the very beginning of the process. It is famous that Peter Mandelson hosted dinners with political people at his house and in restaurants—it is widely reported. Did you attend any of those dinners in 2024 or up to your departure in 2025 at his house or in restaurants?

Morgan McSweeney: I didn't hear that last bit.

Q1075 **Fleur Anderson:** Did you attend any of Peter Mandelson's private dinners that he hosted in his house or in restaurants? He held monthly dinners for political people. It is just reported; I have not been to any of these, and I don't think anyone here has, but have you been to any of those dinners?

Morgan McSweeney: I have been to two dinners in his house. I think they were both in 2024 with a wider range of people. I think two—maybe one lunch and one dinner. In a restaurant in the whole four years I knew him, I think twice as well.

Q1076 Fleur Anderson: Okay. We are trying to get to the bottom of who really proposed Mandelson's appointment. You have said you were sorry for your part in it, but also that, before you started in post after the election, there were some access talks. You referred to access talks in January 2024, which you were not party to, but which happened—and you know that Peter Mandelson's name came up. Was it a done deal?

Morgan McSweeney: Sorry, no—I did not say his name had come up. I spoke to Simon Case to try to piece together what happened. I said to him, "I recall there being a sense that we always seemed to have wanted a political appointment—when do you first remember this?" Simon Case said that in January/February 2024 he had asked the Prime Minister's access team what they thought about the US ambassador. They were replacing Dame Karen Pierce; they were thinking about who to replace her with and what the process was. Simon Case was informed that the Prime Minister was minded to make a political decision, but as far as I know, Mandelson's name was not in that.

Q1077 Fleur Anderson: At the two dinners and lunches that you attended, did Peter Mandelson lobby you about becoming the ambassador to the US?

Morgan McSweeney: He did lobby me, but not at either one of those dinners. One of those dinners was after he was ambassador. I should say also that I had dinner when I went to the US, in the embassy. He did lobby me, but I don't think at the dinners.

Q1078 Fleur Anderson: In the process you have talked about, George Osborne and Peter Mandelson were the two names in play. How far did the process of George Osborne's potential appointment, which then did not lead on, go? Did he have due diligence assessment made of him?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes.

Q1079 Fleur Anderson: What was the outcome of that due diligence? Was that the important factor between the two, one going before another?

Morgan McSweeney: That was not the important factor in my recommendation, no. I can't remember what the due diligence said for George Osborne, but it was carried out. I spoke to both of them, and I think it was similar.

Q1080 Fleur Anderson: In your due diligence meetings with Peter Mandelson, and when you subsequently asked for more in writing, how many times did you meet him, and how long were your meetings with him for the due diligence?

Morgan McSweeney: None. The due diligence report was carried out by PET.

Q1081 Fleur Anderson: By PET—and by writing to you?

Morgan McSweeney: No, no. PET carried out the process. As I said in my resignation letter, there are a lot of lessons to be learned from this. The way that whole process works is not up to it. There should be, as



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default, an interview with the candidates for something like this. There wasn't. I was given a report—the Prime Minister was given a report—by the propriety and ethics team, which was the due diligence report. That was conduct by them without any involvement from me. They gave that to the private office. I followed up with some questions, but apart from that email, that was the only part I played in it.

Q1082 Fleur Anderson: That was the due diligence report that is now in the Humble Address papers that we have all seen. Is that the report you are talking about?

Morgan McSweeney: Minus my email.

Q1083 Fleur Anderson: I appreciate your talking about the victims and survivors of Epstein at the beginning. I think I speak for the whole Committee in saying they are very much on our mind. Do you think the violence against women and girls aspect of this and the relationship with Epstein were downplayed during the conversations you had with the other people advising the Prime Minister and with the Prime Minister at that time?

Morgan McSweeney: I think it should have been a lot more to the fore. I know the Prime Minister takes this issue very, very seriously and has done for a great number of years. I think it should have been way more done so at the time; that is my view. But my understanding of the nature of the relationship that Mandelson had at that time—not what I now know—was that he wasn't somebody who had defended Epstein. He was very apologetic for having kept contact with him, and he was very regretful for it, but I agree it should have been much more to the fore at the time.

Q1084 Fleur Anderson: I know you were not there at the interview. Do you think he was asked enough open questions or had the ability to give the full extent of his relationship?

Morgan McSweeney: There is no doubt he was at a lot of stages. This was somebody who was in the public eye; there is no doubt.

Q1085 Fleur Anderson: Finally from me, about the documentation of this process, decisions of this magnitude should not be done informally on the sofa. At previous Committee sessions, Members have become aware of a lack of some papers. Today, it has been referred to that the Prime Minister received a lot of views, and we do not have any paperwork of that, and that the Foreign Secretary was involved a number of times, and we do not have record of that. We do not have record of the George Osborne side of this, and there are other parts. Do you accept that this was not documented well, and why do you think that is?

Morgan McSweeney: I think government is conducted with conversations as well as papers. Prime Ministers should be able to phone people up and say, "What do you think about something?" I think it is right that decisions are recorded. It is difficult for me to say what is the appropriate level of recording those decisions, and the minutes, because it is not where my expertise is. There certainly needs to be enough that people can see enough of a paper trail. But I also think it is appropriate for

a Prime Minister to say, "Look, I want to get someone's views; I want to have a conversation with them," but those conversations are not the same as where he makes the decisions. There needs to be enough recording around those, but it is not my area of expertise.

Q1086 **Chair:** That sounds great, except that the decisions themselves were not recorded. That is the point. I come back to this point. I know you say it is all the civil servants' fault and not yours, but you were in charge of that office where they were not recording decisions being made.

Morgan McSweeney: I think they were recording decisions being made on a pretty regular basis.

Chair: Okay. They just haven't told us about them.

Morgan McSweeney: I saw regular paperwork on a whole bunch of decisions. If I have in any way slighted the people I worked with in No. 10, please forgive me because these were the most wonderful people and very serious people.

Chair: I am sure they were. I just want to see evidence of decisions being made in relation to Mandelson and how those decisions were made. We have the Humble Address, and we have all this paperwork coming out, but we have not seen any evidence of how these decisions were made. We are having to take the memories of witnesses, which, as we can see, are different.

Q1087 **Edward Morello:** I want to return to the original questions at the opening. You talked about the timeline and that, in meetings with Simon Case prior to coming into Government, the Prime Minister was already minded to make a political appointment. According to what you have said, at that point no names were being discussed, but why was the Prime Minister already thinking about making a political appointment to this particular post when we did not know the outcome of the election, there was somebody good currently doing the job, and a shortlisting process for a diplomatic candidate had already been run? What is the logic in saying, "I might make a political appointment to that job there"?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't think I said there were no names being discussed. I don't know what names Simon Case discussed; I just don't know, because I was not in that conversation. In January and February 2024, my total focus was on the election. I was very reluctant to have any conversations with anybody about who would do what job if we won the election, because I did not like that kind of talk.

Q1088 **Edward Morello:** That is fine. I am just wondering why, prior to the election, the Prime Minister was already saying, "That job there is going to be a political appointment."

Morgan McSweeney: He did not discuss it with me. I wasn't intimately involved in preparation for government work. I do not remember even having a view on it at the time. The Australians did something similar with Kevin Rudd. I don't know where the origin of that idea came from.



Q1089 Edward Morello: To the Chair's point about this looking like it was a railroaded decision, prior to the election, you already have the PM identifying that position as one he wants to make a political appointment to. You then have two candidates—again, not to speak to the suitability of either of them, but one is a friend of Jeffrey Epstein; I am assuming the other isn't—and everyone you speak to is giving you pros and cons. Is the other one actually a stooge? Is George Osborne just on there so that you have a tick-box exercise with two candidates? You have gone through this entire process ignoring all the red flags with all the due diligence, with every conversation with every single person saying, "Well, you know, it's a difficult decision; there are pros and cons to that one." Are they also saying there are pros and cons to the other one, and does it not just come down to which one is a friend of a paedophile?

Morgan McSweeney: There are three things on that. One is that I don't think he railroaded. If the civil service was being told in January, way ahead of the election, that should Labour win the general election, they would look to a political appointment, that was ample time to prepare processes and talk to senior officials to say, "This is the direction a Labour Administration might want to go in." That is the first thing.

The second is that, if Kamala Harris had won the US presidential election, I think it would have gone to a different candidate. The third is that the nature of the relationship between Mandelson and Epstein wasn't known to us at the time. It is not the nature of the relationship that we understood it to be. It is not the nature of relationship that he represented it to be.

The final part is that George Osborne was a very credible candidate. Part of the thinking was the relationship between sister parties, or parties of a similar political persuasion, his more recent experience, the fact that he had commercial acumen and the fact that he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. He was a very credible candidate and one we gave serious weight to.

Q1090 Edward Morello: May I push back on a couple of those, please, Mr McSweeney? We have already seen that the due diligence report contained the 2019 JP Morgan report, which shows that the relationship was more extensive. As for putting in place the process—the civil servants putting in place the processes—according to Philip Barton's timeline, they were given barely a month to go through the entire process, and do DV, agrément and everything in order to get him in place in time for inauguration, which was your desire.

Morgan McSweeney: And if it had taken longer—it did take longer—then so be it. We didn't ask them to skip any steps, and they were not able to get it done in time for the inauguration. Of course, if they had said, "The timetable you want to deliver on is impossible," and, "We need a bit more time generally," or, "We want a bit more time on this one," that is what would have happened. There was nothing stopping the permanent secretary saying that to the Foreign Secretary, or nothing stopping the permanent secretary saying to the Cabinet Secretary: "We need a bit

more time. A month is not long enough." As it turned out, they did not complete the process until several weeks later.

Chair: I want to do an assessment now. We are at four minutes to 1. We hoped that we would finish by 1, but I think we are unlikely to now—everybody is agitating, because they are all thinking, "Actually, there are further questions we want to ask." What I would like to say at this stage is that we aspire to finish by 20 past and we absolutely must finish by half-past. I will take Uma, then Alan and Alex, who I know have quite a lot of questions, and Dan as well. John, Abtisam and Aphra may have follow-ups. I think we will do it that way.

Q1091 **Uma Kumaran:** I put on the record that, over the past decade, I have worked twice with the witness—he is used to robust conversations with me. Hello, Morgan. Both Sir Philip Barton and Sir Olly Robbins have said that it was No. 10's decision to announce the appointment of Peter Mandelson before the vetting process. Did you or did anyone in No. 10 make that decision? In your previous answer, you said that you suspected that Peter Mandelson had said that, so was this a No. 10 decision, or was it a Peter Mandelson decision?

Morgan McSweeney: It wasn't a Peter Mandelson decision. I don't know whose decision it was. It wasn't my decision and, as the Prime Minister has said, now we would do things differently—but it didn't jump out to me as a problem that DV was happening after the announcement. That is what happened in the case of the National Security Adviser and my own appointment.

Q1092 **Uma Kumaran:** Would you have expected senior civil servants to intervene to flag any issues, to say, "Actually, this is not how the process happens. The vetting should happen first," because Sir Philip Barton said that vetting should happen first. We are not from the civil service and we are not to be expected to know this. Would you expect the civil service to have intervened there and told you these things?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, absolutely, if somebody thought there was a problem with how it was being run. I had a pretty good relationship with both Simon Case and Chris Wormald as Cabinet Secretaries. I met them pretty regularly and there were always opportunities for them to tell me when and where, which they did do, if they thought a Minister was doing something wrong or a spad was doing something wrong, or if they were unhappy with something No. 10 was doing.

Q1093 **Uma Kumaran:** You said that you made clear to the Prime Minister the pros and cons of this appointment, and that you would not have put Peter Mandelson forward had Kamala Harris won the presidency. Do you think the politics of the day were weighing more heavily, rather than the trade deal, or were they hand in hand?

Morgan McSweeney: I honestly don't know if I would have put him forward had Kamala Harris won. I think he wouldn't have got it. A broader range of candidates would have been available to the Prime Minister, and I think he would probably have gone in a different direction, because of the



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nature of the relationships that were available to other candidates. For me, the top concern was the trade deal, and his role as the EU commissioner was a big factor in that, but the potential political relationships were also a factor, yes.

Q1094 Uma Kumaran: Was the Prime Minister led to believe that Peter Mandelson's risks—the cons, as you have set out—were manageable? Did you have that conversation with him? Did anyone have that conversation with him?

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, that was part of his conversations, always.

Q1095 Uma Kumaran: In your answers today, you said that you didn't feel that the truth was put forward at the time by Peter Mandelson in his response to your emails. Did you communicate that to the Prime Minister?

Morgan McSweeney: No. At the time I thought he was telling the truth.

Q1096 Uma Kumaran: Okay. So you didn't raise with the Prime Minister that you had these concerns. You just put these questions to Peter Mandelson, you got the answers, and that was that.

Morgan McSweeney: I thought they were truthful.

Q1097 Uma Kumaran: Okay. I asked Cat Little if the developed vetting would have brought up the information that Bloomberg had in their leaks—really grave issues of Peter Mandelson sharing information about market-sensitive matters when he was then in government, which is huge and a betrayal of this country. If that had been put to you, would you have ever considered Peter Mandelson?

Morgan McSweeney: Not at all. No way. One of the things that subsequently surprised me is that I would have assumed—and maybe I did—that our Foreign Office would have been in contact with US counterparts to see what information they held on him, but absolutely no way would he have come close to No. 10 or any job in this Government had that been known.

Q1098 Uma Kumaran: It looks like you have been following our evidence sessions closely. You have seen these traffic-light boxes—the UKSV red boxes. It turns out that, at every stage of this process, the boxes were never actually seen, until this was leaked. It is a bizarre process all round, and one that does not seem fit for purpose. Were any of these issues raised with you by developed vetting or the FCDO—by anybody—as the Prime Minister's chief of staff?

Morgan McSweeney: No, they are completely compartmentalised from spads and, as it turns out, more from Ministers than I thought they were, too. I think it is quite right that it is compartmentalised for spads. I think there are clearly a lot of things that need to be learned about how all these things work, but there is no way that anyone in the Foreign Office would have discussed anyone else's DV with me at any point. There is a lot that needs to be learned from this whole process.



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I said—and I felt at the time, when all this came out in September—that I know what I did wrong. I know the judgment calls I made that were wrong. I will live with them for the rest of my life. But as a chief of staff, a political adviser, you are also relying on the information being presented to you. There are a lot of people in the state whose job is to protect the state, the Government and the reputation. You rely on that information coming to you. You do not have the ability to investigate, ask more questions or look deeper and deeper. Clearly, it didn't work. It shouldn't be reliant on just one adviser giving a bad piece of advice and then the whole thing goes wrong. The state needs to be more robust and stronger in all of this.

Q1099 Uma Kumaran: My final question to you, Morgan, is this. Everyone has talked about hindsight. Lots was known about Peter Mandelson before this appointment. I appreciate that you have said you made a judgment call that you have since said was wrong, but there was a very well-publicised friendship with one of the world's most notorious sex offenders. How was it that nobody within No. 10 saw this, which so many of us had an aversion to, as an issue? What was going on there, that this was not the immediate red flag?

Morgan McSweeney: I think the thinking was that he presented the time that he was in contact with Epstein as being an acquaintanceship. He regretted maintaining contact after his first conviction, when he realised whatever he realised—according to his story at the time. He was not defending what this guy did in his first conviction, and he was saying that he was duped into understanding the nature of what had happened.

Q1100 Chair: He still got convicted, though. He couldn't get round that. He had been convicted of sex trafficking a minor. How do you talk your way out of that? Once a friend has been convicted of that, surely they are no longer a friend, let alone staying in their flat.

Morgan McSweeney: I don't have anyone in my life like that, but he didn't—

Q1101 Chair: But he did, and you promoted him as being the next ambassador to the United States.

Morgan McSweeney: He didn't say that he was a friend; he denied that he was a friend. He tried to say that he was a passing acquaintance, that he was somebody he didn't really know enough about to ask questions.

Q1102 Chair: And the due diligence said otherwise.

Morgan McSweeney: The due diligence didn't say he was a friend, and Mandelson—

Chair: He stayed in his house—the due diligence said that he stayed in his house.

Q1103 Alan Gemmell: Thanks for your time, Morgan. I think you said earlier that you thought that the DV process might also pick up untruths or misrepresentations by Peter Mandelson. Do you know if the answers that

he gave you on the Epstein follow-up or the due diligence report were sent to the DV system—the officers—to use as evidence to check the answers he had given you?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't know.

Q1104 **Alex Ballinger:** We heard from Sir Philip this morning that he felt that the speed of the appointment was unnecessary: Karen Pierce was doing a good job, and the Administration would take some time to set up. In his evidence, Olly Robbins said that the whole process felt "weirdly rushed". Why did you push for such a short timeline between the announcement and the appointment?

Morgan McSweeney: Did Olly Robbins say that it was "weirdly rushed"?

Chair: No, Jonathan Powell did.

Alex Ballinger: Okay, Jonathan Powell.

Morgan McSweeney: The pace of it was not raised with me as a concern at the time, other than that we—as in, No. 10; this was the consensus view—said that we wanted him in place by the inauguration so that he could begin the work. In the end, the Foreign Office were unable to complete all the necessary arrangements by then. There was no point where, if they had said, "We need more time to carry out further checks," we would have said, "We've got our own timetable here. You need to crack on regardless." They took the time that they needed to do it right, and all the evidence suggests that they carried out the processes in the correct way.

I think that we wanted to—it is not unusual for No. 10 to say, "We want things to be happening quicker," than the Departments are prepared to move. It always ends up being that No. 10 kind of gets some of its own way and the Department gets some of its own way, and that is what happened in this case.

Q1105 **Alex Ballinger:** You did not think to consult with the head of the diplomatic service on that timeline before you announced it and then put on pressure to deliver on that timeline.

Morgan McSweeney: I don't think that we publicly announced our preferred date when we made the announcement. No, I don't think that when we announced that Mandelson was going to be the ambassador that we said, "He will be ambassador by this date."

Q1106 **Alex Ballinger:** We twice heard, both from Philip Barton and Sir Olly, that the Cabinet Office was asking whether DV was necessary at all and whether, because Lord Mandelson was a Privy Counsellor, that would be sufficient. Presumably the Cabinet Office would not have done that of their own volition. Did that come from No. 10? Where did that thinking come from?

Morgan McSweeney: Absolutely not from No. 10; I would find that bizarre. I would have thought that of course an ambassador would have to have DV.

Q1107 **Alex Ballinger:** Where might that thought have come from?

Morgan McSweeney: I have no idea, but I was reassured by what Philip Barton was saying, that it was not something that was considered for long. But I only found out about that as part of this. I find it bizarre, and I would have assumed that of course the US ambassador should have DV. I do not know how serious of a suggestion it was by anybody.

Q1108 **Alex Ballinger:** You said yourself that because you and the National Security Adviser were appointed without DV, it was not unusual. Do you think that No. 10, when you were chief of staff, had a “dismissive” or an “uninterested” approach to security vetting because of your own experience?

Morgan McSweeney: No. I think everybody in No. 10, because of what you learn in that job, takes national security more seriously than any other issue.

Q1109 **Alex Ballinger:** When you were appointed, after the election, what level of security clearance did you have?

Morgan McSweeney: I think it is common practice for ex-civil servants not to talk about the security clearances they had. I will continue that practice, because when you are in post you are told that you can’t say what clearances you have. I had all the necessary clearances to do my job, and I saw whatever papers I was given; that process is managed by civil servants.

Q1110 **Alex Ballinger:** You had DV at the point that you were appointed chief of staff to the Prime Minister.

Morgan McSweeney: I don’t want to say what my security clearances were, but I had all the security clearances I needed to do my job. I completed the forms, the processes and the interviews the same as anyone else.

Q1111 **Alex Ballinger:** This whole thing is about security clearances and developed vetting; we have had a long conversation about the process. I think if you had had developed vetting at that point, when you were chief of staff to the Prime Minister, you would be able to tell us, and I am surprised that you are not telling us.

Morgan McSweeney: Because I understand from speaking to civil servants that the practice is that they do not share what security clearances they had, I will follow that practice, but say only that I had all the necessary clearances to do my job, to read the papers I read and to attend the meetings that I attended, and that I completed every form and everything that was asked of me in all those processes.

Q1112 **Alex Ballinger:** Do you think that attitude, and because it is a different process for spads from civil servants—and I got DV when I was in



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the Foreign Office, as I think every other person does—contributed to you trying to expedite the process and having an uninterested attitude towards Peter Mandelson getting DV?

Morgan McSweeney: Not at all. I think there would have been no suggestion from anyone in No. 10 to skip steps or to take any risks on national security, but at the same time I would not have asked the Foreign Office about how someone's security clearance was going because that is not something that the Foreign Office would discuss with me.

Q1113 **Chair:** There are photographs taken, though, of people wearing their passes and they are different colours. A green one is DV and an orange one is the lower level. There is a photograph of you with a green pass but not when you first took over the job of being chief of staff, so when did you apply for your DV and how long did it take for you to get it?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't recall. The process is driven by how quickly people fill their forms in. A lot of people take a very long time.

Q1114 **Chair:** Would it be unfair to suggest that you did not fill in the form straightaway?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't know—I don't know why you would think I did not fill in the forms. I filled in the forms as quickly as I could. They are quite extensive and it is not something that you can just sit down in an hour and rattle your way through. If you do not get it completed—I mean, it takes a long time, but I took all that side of things extremely seriously because, in order to do my job, I needed to have the necessary clearances. I filled in whatever forms. You also have to gather a lot of information about things. It takes a while, but I always did it as best as I could and as quickly as I could.

Q1115 **Sir John Whittingdale:** On 4 February, Parliament passed a motion requiring the divulgence of all communications relating to the appointment of Peter Mandelson. On 25 March, you reported that your telephone had been stolen. The Metropolitan police have released the transcript of the call you made relating to the theft of your mobile phone. You did not say, "This is the chief of staff to the Prime Minister. My Government-issued phone has been stolen," which one would imagine would have been taken pretty seriously. You just said, "Oh, hello, someone just robbed my phone." Why did you not make it clear that this was not just an ordinary theft; this was a phone that was likely to contain highly sensitive information?

Morgan McSweeney: The dates are slightly incorrect. My phone was not stolen on 20 March; my phone was stolen on 20 October, so it was four months before.

Sir John Whittingdale: Sorry.

Morgan McSweeney: I gave up my Government phone pretty much as soon as I left; within a couple of days, I handed all my kit back to No. 10.



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My phone was stolen on 20 October. I was the victim of crime. Somebody hopped on to the pavement and took my phone from me. The first thing I did was to try to retrieve it. I tried to chase, which was probably a mistake. The next thing I did was I phoned No. 10 and I would have gone with whatever they told me to do. Now, I thought at the time that they would be able to track the phone, and that is what would happen, given, as you say, what was potentially on that phone. That was my assumption.

I then called 999. If No. 10 had told me, "You need to tell the police call handler what your job is," I would have done so, but otherwise, I didn't do that as a matter of course—I didn't, in any part of my job, go round saying, "I'm a very serious and senior person." If No. 10 had asked me to do that, I would have done that.

I also thought at the time—wrongly, again—that a squad car might come by and I could explain a bit more if a squad car had come by. Then I made further phone calls to No. 10 where I had hoped that they could track the phone and I could tell the police where that phone was. Like you and like everyone else reading about this, I was quite surprised by how limited the security is around the chief of staff's telephone.

Q1116 Sir John Whittingdale: One of the reasons the squad car didn't come round was maybe because you gave the wrong location. You said you were in Belgrave Street, which the operator interpreted to be in Stepney. You said, "he turned left. There's a park on top of the road" and the operator said, "Stepney Green Park, ok" and you said, "Yeah. He turned left there." That wasn't anywhere near Stepney; it was in Pimlico, I understand.

Morgan McSweeney: I also said I was in Westminster. I said I was in Belgrave Street, Westminster, where I think I was on Lower Belgrave—

Sir John Whittingdale: On Belgrave Road.

Morgan McSweeney: No, I think I might have been on Lower Belgrave Street. It was some months ago. I missed the "Lower"—I didn't see it.

Sir John Whittingdale: And you missed the operator saying "Stepney Park".

Morgan McSweeney: I was also quite adrenalised. What happened was, I chased the guy who stole my phone as far as I could. I was out of breath. I was completely exhausted because I am 48 years of age and shouldn't be chasing people down the street. Then I was trying to go back to the original location that it had happened so that I could tell the 999 operator.

As I was following the guy, he turned away from a park that I could see in front of me, and as I was coming back to try and find the original location, I just assumed that the call handler was looking at it on the map.

I haven't heard the audio. I can't imagine that I was clear and coherent at the time. I was out of breath. I was adrenalised. If I gave any wrong



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direction, it wasn't intentional. But I did say I was in Westminster, and why the squad car didn't come had nothing to do with how the call handler had heard it. The call handler said the squad car wasn't coming while we were on the call.

If the call handler had said to me, "The squad car is there," I would have been much more precise about where I was, so that I could meet the police at the time. As I said, I thought, wrongly, that my phone would be tracked, so that I could retrieve my phone.

Q1117 Sir John Whittingdale: Can we take it that your phone would have contained quite a lot of communications, either with Peter Mandelson or about Peter Mandelson's appointment?

Morgan McSweeney: Probably not much about his appointment that hasn't already been available to No. 10, because when he was sacked, No. 10 did its own—I don't want to say investigation, but its own research on what happened and why it happened and, as part of that process, I was asked to share messages and emails about the appointment and also to be interviewed, as were other members of staff.

Q1118 Chair: Those messages are therefore recorded somewhere.

Morgan McSweeney: Everything that I had at that time in September, which was more than a month before my phone was stolen, I shared it with the No. 10 team. Beyond that, any messages that I sent to Ministers or staff or officials would still be on their phones.

Q1119 Chair: That should be in the Humble Address material at some stage.

Morgan McSweeney: I would have thought so.

Q1120 Sir John Whittingdale: So, actually, you believe there is a record of all your communications from that phone, which, if relevant, will be released.

Morgan McSweeney: No, I don't think all of my phone records will still be available, but I don't know what the recipients of my messages have, and they will have to share their messages too. I can't tell you what the Cabinet Office have—I am not in charge of the Humble Address process and wasn't when I was there, and I haven't been told by the Cabinet Office what has been released and when. But I gave all my Government kit back to No. 10 when I left.

Q1121 Sir John Whittingdale: One would assume, given the sensitivity of the material on this phone—maybe all sorts of things besides Peter Mandelson—that there would be quite a robust effort to recover it. Has there been any news as to whether it has been found?

Morgan McSweeney: The police keep me up to date, but I don't think that I should share the latest. But they haven't found the phone, no.

Q1122 Abtisam Mohamed: I am just very quickly following on from Sir John's questions. For the missing period, from October onwards, was the



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contents of your phone not backed up to a cloud or linked to a device, or have we lost all data for that period?

Morgan McSweeney: From 20 October to my departure, all those messages should still be on the phone that I gave back to the Government, so they should have all that. For everything prior to that, whatever the settings were on the phone, I didn't change them. I didn't change whatever default settings people have on WhatsApp.

Q1123 **Abtisam Mohamed:** So it could be linked to a cloud—it could be backed up somewhere?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't know. My understanding is that it's not—that they don't connect back to the cloud. But whatever the default settings were on my phone, I just kept those. Government phones are pretty restrictive of what you can do, as a member of staff, with them. When I became chief of staff, we couldn't copy and paste on those phones.

Q1124 **Chair:** Did you have disappearing messages on your WhatsApp? That is the question.

Morgan McSweeney: Yes, with some people—with most people. Yeah, I think I did.

Q1125 **Chair:** With Peter Mandelson did you have disappearing messages?

Morgan McSweeney: I probably did, yeah.

Q1126 **Chair:** I have just one other sweep-up question before I go to Aphra. You have been asked about dinners with Lord Mandelson. I wondered whether you could also tell us about this. I think there were also monthly dinners at Lord Liddle's, which I believe Peter Mandelson used to attend too. Were you attending those?

Morgan McSweeney: I attended a couple of dinners in Roger Liddle's house that Mandelson was at. The reportage of these dinners made it sound like these were something that was happening when we were working in opposition. I read about them in a book. But they weren't—

Q1127 **Chair:** We all know what book it is. Was it not part of the history of Labour Together as well?

Morgan McSweeney: No. I will explain a little bit about it, if I could, because I think there's a bit of stylisation going on. A lot of that period the book is covering is covid, so nobody was going round to anyone's house for dinner.

Mandelson did not like Labour Together at all. He was not a fan of what I was doing. He was not interested in it. He broadly didn't agree with it. I think the first conversation I had with him, from best memory, was in 2017, and the reason why I had that conversation with him—I was also having a conversation with a lot of former senior Labour grandees. You will recall there was a group of Labour MPs who were arguing to split the Labour party. I did not agree with that; I thought it was a terrible idea, and I was trying to basically make the case and build support to oppose



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that. I met with Mandelson as part of that. He wasn't particularly interested in what I was doing at Labour Together—at all, whatsoever.

The next time I really started to meet him more was in about 2019 at social gatherings—a couple at Roger Liddle's house. But I didn't really have a one-to-one relationship with him. I don't think he backed Keir Starmer to be leader of the Labour party. I don't recall him doing so. He certainly wasn't working on the campaign, wasn't donating to the party, so if he voted for him, which he might have done, but from what I could tell—so this sort of mythos that has been built, that he is some sort of guiding hand behind me or my strategies or my life, is not the case.

I started to try to engage with him for advice in about late 2020 or early 2021—I can't remember when—when I was thinking about: how do we win the next general election? I also did so with characters like Margaret McDonagh or Spencer Livermore, people who had run campaigns before, because I wanted to know what a winning campaign would look like. He had been part of one in 1997. That is why I engaged with him then. But there was no closeness of relationship prior to then whatsoever.

Q1128 Aphra Brandreth: Civil servants, including those in ambassadorial roles, can be eligible for a severance payment when their employment is terminated. Were you aware that Peter Mandelson would receive a severance payment on leaving his role?

Morgan McSweeney: No.

Q1129 Aphra Brandreth: So at no time, until it came out in the media, were you ever told or aware that he would get payment. You were not consulted at any stage on the terms of his departure.

Morgan McSweeney: I was not consulted on his departure. I do not know if I was aware, but I was not consulted and I did not give a view; I was not asked for a view.

Q1130 Aphra Brandreth: Were you aware that others in No. 10 were considering whether making a severance payment would reduce the likelihood of Lord Mandelson potentially becoming a public critic of the Government?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't know. His contract was with the Foreign Office.

Q1131 Aphra Brandreth: Okay. So you do not recognise the reports that there may have been emails that said that, if they paid him off, it would limit his reputational risk.

Morgan McSweeney: Just from what I have read. I was not in those conversations, so I do not know much about it, I'm afraid.

Q1132 Aphra Brandreth: Do you believe that those conversations may have taken place?

Morgan McSweeney: I don't know. Not with me.



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Alan Gemmell: Just for the record, I attended a dinner at Roger Liddle's with Peter Mandelson, I believe after he was appointed ambassador.

Chair: And was Morgan McSweeney there?

Alan Gemmell: No.

Chair: That was the last question. Thank you very much, and thank you for your time. I am sorry that we have taken so long.