Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

Oral evidence: National Security Machinery

Monday 26 April 2021

4.05 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Margaret Beckett (The Chair); Lord Brennan; Richard Graham; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Baroness Henig; Baroness Hodgson of Abinger; Darren Jones; Lord King of Bridgwater; Lord Laming; Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho; Angus Brendan MacNeil; Baroness Neville-Jones; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Lord Strasburger.

Evidence Session No. 3 Virtual Proceeding Questions 67 - 82

Witnesses

I: Lord McDonald of Salford, former Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Bronwen Maddox, Director, Institute for Government.

Examination of witnesses

Lord McDonald of Salford and Bronwen Maddox.

Q67 **The Chair:** Lord McDonald and Ms Maddox, thank you both very much for coming to give evidence to us today. We very much appreciate it. As you may realise, this is the third evidence session in our present inquiry into the national security machinery.

We were particularly keen to hear from you, Lord McDonald, partly because you were Permanent Secretary at the FCO, but also because you were foreign policy adviser to the then Prime Minister in the period before the change of Administration in 2010, so you saw the move from what existed before to the structures that have existed since 2010.

Bronwen, we are very keen to have your perspectives as an informed external stakeholder, but also because of the detailed analysis and reports that the Institute for Government continues to produce on all of these matters. Welcome to you both.

I will begin, if I may, with you, Lord McDonald. How would you assess, from your point of view, the benefits of the creation of the National Security Council, as now is, broadly, and the National Security Adviser role in 2010? As you go along, can you comment on how big a change that was from the previous machinery and what difference it made?

Lord McDonald of Salford: Thank you, Chair. As you say, I was around before the transition and saw the new system working for five years as PUS at the Foreign Office.

I would group the changes into three. The first was the consistency of top-level attention. Before, when I was foreign policy adviser to the Prime Minister, there was necessary attention when there was a crisis, but there was not really a schedule for that attention. The meetings were more ad hoc. They were more frequently cancelled. We were tucking ourselves into the prime ministerial and other senior Minister diaries when we could.

When the National Security Council was launched, Prime Minister Cameron made it plain from the start that he wanted it to be regular, even weekly. He and his two successors pretty much abided by that ambition. I smile, because in the last year of the pandemic I do not think that has been the case every week or every month, but there has certainly been more consistent senior attention over the last 10 years.

The second is the seniority of the role and the support for the role. I did it as a director-general, in current speak. The National Security Adviser is Permanent Secretary rank. We are all human beings; Whitehall is as hierarchy conscious as anywhere else in the system, and I think having a Permanent Secretary gives the National Security Adviser and the National Security Secretariat greater clout in the system. I think, on balance, that is a good thing.

Third is the number of issues taken. In the olden days, we had to be rigorously prioritised. The secretariat, when I was there, was under 30 people. We did Iraq and Afghanistan. I had a relationship with the National Security Adviser of the United States. I also dealt very regularly with other opposite numbers, notably India and Japan. That was pretty much it.

Now, the National Security Adviser and secretariat range very much more widely. That may be something for you and the committee to look at. They are not, in my view, as prioritised as they used to be, or perhaps as they should be.

The Chair: Is it more analogous now to the role of the NSA in the United States, would you say?

Lord McDonald of Salford: I think that was the express ambition of Mr Cameron, so in some ways, yes, and unapologetically so. You put your finger on a key point for the working of the council: it is the person in the chair. The Prime Minister of the day is hugely important to the agenda, the way it is working and what they are working on. The three Prime

Ministers while it has existed have each adopted very different approaches to the NSC.

The Chair: Interesting. When you were at the FCO as Permanent Secretary, do you remember any particular instances where you thought that the NSC operated its role and functions particularly well? Correspondingly, were there instances where you felt that despite the possibilities of that role and machinery it rather fell short?

Lord McDonald of Salford: The best case study was the Skripal crisis in 2018, when there was very clear and good division of labour between the NSS and the Foreign Office. The DG in the Foreign Office, Philip Barton—now the PUS in FCDO—was allowed to be the pen holder: the lead for the whole of Whitehall. But it was absolutely something co-ordinated from the centre, and I think we achieved our national objectives: the co-ordinated expulsion of more than 150 Russian diplomats, and the ramping up of the rules of the OPCW happened in part because our structures were properly knitted together.

The Chair: You cannot recall a time when it did not. There has been a certain amount of suggestion that, maybe, the NSC sometimes overconcentrated on something. I do not want to put words or ideas into your mouth.

Lord McDonald of Salford: My main feeling, Chair, is that the agenda was very long. The NSC was popping up in many policy areas. In the Foreign Office, you never knew where it was going to surface next. That was an issue.

The Chair: Interesting. Bronwen, perhaps I could ask you about this. In 2014, the institute's reports highlighted the particular strengths—very much, I believe, in the same terms that Lord McDonald has just used. Looking at it from today's vantage point, do you think those strengths still apply?

Bronwen Maddox: I think they do. I would agree with his account that the construction of the NSA and the Security Council has worked. Whether it has the stature of the American equivalents I am not sure, but that is partly a matter of history. We see in the States that with different Administrations the stature of the National Security Adviser comes and goes. That is something of a euphemism.

I think it really has worked. It has taken the role from being obviously foreign policy adviser to the Prime Minister and given it more prominence within Whitehall and externally. There is a degree of formality. As our 2014 report said, some of that comes from the Prime Minister's own investment in it, but some comes from the formality of the meetings and of the engagement with the rest of Whitehall. I think that has all been to the good of the purpose of it, which is to produce a consistent and thoughtful approach for the UK to its external threats, and to work out a role for the UK in approaching those threats, some of which might be, if you like, purely hostile but some of which might need quite nuanced

treatment where there are several different aims. I think the structure has helped in putting together the costs and the benefits and trying to articulate for the Prime Minister what the UK's role is going to be.

No structure is the answer if you have someone who is not going to answer the needs of the job. If you have the right person, they could triumph over lack of structure, but there is no question that the structure helps, and I think this one has helped.

The Chair: The structure is supportive.

Bronwen Maddox: Yes, immensely supportive. It has helped to advance and encourage the right kind of person.

The Chair: Lord McDonald, going back for a second to you on the IfG report in 2014, I believe that you said that the willingness of the FCO to cede sovereignty helped to make the NSC work as well as it did. Is that fair? Is that right?

Lord McDonald of Salford: Yes, that is a continuing discussion. It helped a lot for the FCO to get used to the idea of a more powerful centre that the first four National Security Advisers all came from the Foreign Office and were identifiably people who knew the FCO. We have of course, for the first time, since the beginning of this month, a National Security Adviser from the home Civil Service with deep experience through the Ministry of Defence in this range of issues, but who has never had an FCO or FCDO job. We will see how that pans out, but the fact that for the first 10 years the National Security Advisers have come from the Foreign Office stable has helped.

Q68 **Richard Graham:** Lord McDonald, hello. During your time on the committee, the National Security Adviser produced a learning lessons report in 2017 from the Iraq inquiry, in particular recommending the need for greater diversity of input, to avoid groupthink, and came up with the so-called Chilcot checklist as a sort of process for that. To what extent do you think that has contributed to greater quality of input to NSC decision-making? During your last three years there, to what extent was the Chilcot checklist actually used?

Lord McDonald of Salford: Thank you, Mr Graham. There are two points that I make as a retired diplomat; I would not make either of these points in quite these terms if I was still serving.

First, yes, we needed to be more diverse; we needed to guard against groupthink. But in my view the National Security Council, particularly NSC(O), the officials supporting the National Security Council, grew too much. Classically, you would have the Foreign Office, the MoD, the agencies and the Treasury. In the last couple of years, it looked pretty much like the Cabinet, so you would also have the Home Office, the Department of Trade, DCMS, the Department for Transport and the Government Communications Office. It was at least two-thirds of the Cabinet. It felt to me as though it was losing coherence, because the number of inputs at NSC(O) was so large.

Chilcot was a searing moment. I confess I did not read all 13 volumes, but I read the executive summary, which was already substantial enough. There were lots of lessons to learn. It was on everybody's mind all the time. As an anecdote, one manifestation of our caring about Chilcot was that the checklist that was put in front of us was laminated, so it was kind of congealed. I do not think it was as fresh in our minds as the Chilcot authors would have hoped, but it was certainly physically present.

Richard Graham: Bearing in mind this great laminated guide, how effective do you think it will be in preventing similar groupthink on a totally different issue that might come before the NSC, which might include how we handle issues relating to the Ukraine, Taiwan or other geographic or sectoral areas, where there might be a similar group view that turns out to be wrong?

Lord McDonald of Salford: Mr Graham, there are problems in the system right now, but not because Chilcot has become ossified. The problems are being discussed elsewhere in Whitehall and Westminster today. Relations between officials and Ministers, and the trust and confidence of how advice is given, discussed and processed, are not what they need to be. I think that is more difficult for the system right now than a possible problem of groupthink.

The Chair: Interesting. Thank you.

Q69 **Lord Laming:** Do you have any thoughts on the link between the Joint Intelligence Committee and this committee? From the outset of this committee, the Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee has been embedded in our system. Looking back, and from your perspective, has that been helpful? Do you support that? Any thoughts on it?

The Chair: When you say the committee, I think you mean the NSC.

Lord Laming: I meant the NSC. The problem is that I have just voted, and that took my mind away from this.

Bronwen Maddox: I do not have strong feelings on that. I would like to make a point on the previous question about Chilcot, if that is all right.

Lord Laming: Yes, please.

Bronwen Maddox: It seems to me that the point of Chilcot is that you do not want intelligence or advice from officials to be slanted depending on what Ministers might want to hear. That is the essential point. The issue came up again during Brexit, for example. It comes up often, and probably always will.

One would think that one of these episodes might be inoculation against it, but it is not; nor is lamination of the paper going to do the job. I am not sure that there is a structural protection about it. I think it is simply the lesson one has to draw. Something that has to be taken at high level by civil servants and by Ministers is to remember how quickly ideas

change and are proved wrong. It is not very long ago that we were talking about big power conflict, and for 10 or 15 years we were talking as if terrorism in the ungoverned spaces of the world was everything. Suddenly, we are back to big powers again.

The humility that comes out of these episodes is probably the best protection, but I am struggling to find an institutional one if recent history will not do the job, if you see what I mean. I will leave the question on the heads of the committee to Simon.

Lord Laming: Simon, the link between the two committees.

Lord McDonald of Salford: It has been a key feature from the start that the first person generally who speaks in a discussion at the NSC(O) and the first person the Prime Minister talks to at an NSC discussion is the Chairman of the JIC. All the people who have filled that job—one of them is on today's call—have been very distinguished, and they set the frames of the discussion extremely ably and persuasively.

My issue with it is that, increasingly, the information in the unclassified space is bigger, and maybe more important, than in the classified space. Whitehall is still struggling with how to synthesise that. The Chair of the JIC is very much looking at what the intelligence is saying. Now we have so much else that can be brought into the beginning of a discussion that, in my view, that is not done as well as it might be.

Q70 **Lord Laming:** That is extremely helpful. It leads to my next question. Looking back over the last decade, do you think it has been possible to strike the right balance between intelligence informing decisions while preventing intelligence driving policy-making?

Lord McDonald of Salford: It is a judgment call. I do not think it is bad overall, but another fact I would like to mention to the committee is that, when you get to the NSC, at one end of the table you have Ministers and at the other end you have officials. The only civilian is the PUS at the Foreign Office, or FCDO. Sometimes you can have seven senior folk from the intelligence and military world, so the number of voices is quite weighted towards the secret side. The number of times you hear things is sometimes as influential as the content.

Bronwen Maddox: I am wary of examples where we think of the intelligence actually driving or determining decisions, as opposed to informing them. If we take a slightly different case, the Government were referring to scientific advice in the early stages of coronavirus and saying, "We're following the science". This is something the IfG has written quite a bit on, and it seems to me that the Government might have been better advised to say, "Look, we're taking enormous account of the science, but in the end this is a governmental decision where we have to weigh all kinds of things together against each other". That is one factor.

It seems to me that there was an element of trying to use the science and to defer to the science, and not take the full discomfort of what was necessarily a governmental decision. I think that is where one might be

most comfortable with intelligence being used. It is absolutely to inform things and sometimes to play a central, informing part, but it cannot drive or determine decisions that are properly the domain of the Prime Minister and Ministers.

Lord Laming: Yes, absolutely. Thank you very much for that. I have one more question. Professor Sir David Omand has suggested to us that it is time to refresh the JIC by giving it an overarching role in overseeing the long-term "strategic notice" function of the NSC, covering hazards as well as threats. What do you make of that kind of suggestion?

Lord McDonald of Salford: Personally, I would not locate that in the secret space. I see the need for it, but I do not see why it should be chaired or driven by intelligence rather than open source.

Bronwen Maddox: I think that is quite right. For example, I do not think that putting pandemics in there, which are hazards, helps the detailed consideration of intelligence and threats. It comes down to quite a defined domain. There is plenty to talk about there, and it can get quite muddled with things that are not threats in that sense.

Lord Laming: That is very helpful. May I put it another way? Would a JIC role encompassing natural hazards be within its core capabilities?

Lord McDonald of Salford: No.

Bronwen Maddox: I agree.

Lord Laming: What a team. Thank you, Chair.

Q71 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** Good afternoon, Sir Simon and Bronwen. I very strongly agree with what you have just been saying about the proper place of the JIC.

I want to turn to a slightly different topic, which is fusion and the coverage of domestic issues. One of our witnesses, Theresa May, told us that she felt that the NSC had a rather foreign policy-oriented implication and not enough attention was paid to domestic and Home Office issues. That may be, of course, partly the way she actually ran them.

How well do you think the NSC has performed on both domestic security issues and the domestic aspect of foreign policy issues? The whole idea of the exercise was to link up external and internal and to ensure that the two were taken in the round. Do you think it has done well on that? I would like to ask you about the past, and then perhaps we can turn to the future in a moment.

Lord McDonald of Salford: Of course, the ex-Prime Minister is right. I saw it myself. When David Cameron was in the chair, it really was a foreign policy committee. It reflected the agenda of the day but also the personal interests of David Cameron as Prime Minister. I attended the NSC when David Cameron was Prime Minister and Theresa May was Home Secretary, and she was clearly very frustrated by that. When she became Prime Minister, she very deliberately reoriented the committee,

and the fact that the new National Security Adviser was her ex-Permanent Secretary helped. That is a demonstration of what I mentioned right at the beginning about the character of the person in the chair affecting the whole way the NSC has operated.

Yes, it was different. It was clearly more effective at stirring in domestic; domestic had been absent, so any level of achievement would be more than what went before. For me, the jury is still out. I am not sure that the synthesis is working particularly well. The NSC always felt most clear about its function when it was dealing with something that was classically in the foreign policy area.

Bronwen Maddox: I think it struggles. If it is dealing with something like the manifestation at home of a threat that comes from abroad, such as terrorism, and how to pursue that at home, I think that aspect, specifically the joining up of thinking about terrorism in domestic and foreign policy, has worked.

Where it does not work, and what the fusion doctrine was trying to get at, and where we almost need to deal with it at the highest level with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, is on questions of joining up big bits of policy—for example on Russia, or on China now—with a policy where, on the one hand, quite properly we want to trade with them, but on the other hand we have some security apprehension about their role.

The NSC is not going to be very good at working out how to balance those two things or, indeed, how to make the decisions that follow from being apprehensive about Chinese security intentions. To some extent, you could say the same about Russia and Russian money in London, although it is beginning to feel that we might have a simpler stance towards it, not that ambivalent.

It is important to try to realise what the NSC can do and cannot do. You can see useful discussions taking place on a very specific kind of threat that is going to manifest itself at home and has foreign dimensions, but on wider ones, and there are many wider questions, I think it will struggle.

Baroness Neville-Jones: That is a very interesting answer. It is also rather depressing that you do not think that the NSC is capable of developing an all-round strategy for China. Where else would it happen? I am concerned about that.

Bronwen Maddox: It is a good question. It is if the Prime Minister brings that to it; I do not think the NSC can itself forge that policy if the Prime Minister is not going to forge it.

Baroness Neville-Jones: They need a paper, do they not?

Bronwen Maddox: They need a paper.

Q72 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** Absolutely. Part of the issue of how well the NSC works, of course, is the paperwork that is put in front of it. That is

not part of what we are discussing this afternoon, but it is obviously an issue in how well prepared the meetings are.

Could I turn to the future for a moment? The integrated review has quite a lot to say on the subject of resilience, which to me rather suggests that they agree with your combined judgment that so far the NSC has not been at its best when it comes to domestic issues. It is fair to say, I think—indeed, the IR says it in terms—that on the prosperity agenda and the national security agenda it is increasingly harder to distinguish between the two, the implication obviously being that you need to pay more attention to things that affect our domestic surroundings.

What do you think ought to happen? What ought to be done to improve performance in that area? For instance, should one bring in more departments that are not traditionally a part of the NSC community, or would that make the NSC too big? I think Simon indicated that he thought the NSC could get too big. Is it a question of bringing in officials who are not perhaps normally there, such as the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police? There are an awful lot of money issues, and that is linked to crime prevention.

A specific question is this. There used to be a committee called Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies, which has not been reconstituted. Do you think that will make the general task of tackling the very complex and big agenda on the domestic side more difficult? What are your thoughts on that set of issues?

Bronwen Maddox: I do not think that the creation of individual committees is an answer. The thing I think the NSC needs at this point is really clear framing of the questions. Creation of committees, or some ideal congregation of officials in one room, to me does not answer the problem. We are at an extraordinary time of flux, but many times are like that. A cool decision about which are the key questions that the NSC will try to tackle, and trying to narrow those down, seems to me one of the things that would bring most value at the moment.

The integrated review did a very thoughtful job of trying to anticipate some of the changes, acknowledging that the threats change very often. Just trying to focus on the ones that the NSC can best tackle is best at this point. There are a lot of cross-cutting issues at this point, almost more than at any time I can think of in writing about government—climate change, Brexit, coronavirus and all kinds of foreign issues that are essentially bundled up. If one threw in everything, one could make a case for half the departments in Whitehall being there.

The value and the leadership of the NSA at this point is to decide which key questions Britain can most usefully answer about its own approach to these things. If you bundle everything in, Whitehall could tie itself up in gigantic meetings for years, and I am not sure it would answer the key questions about the threats.

Lord McDonald of Salford: I agree strongly with everything that Bronwen said. One thing that it lacks at the minute is prioritisation and making some choices. There may be mistakes in making choices, but, as Bronwen set out, it is the right thing to do, even if later we discover that we have not got it quite right. It would still be better to focus the NSC on the top three or four cross-cutting issues that the country needs to face.

The second point is that we have tried horizon scanning, as you said, Baroness Neville-Jones, but it has never been very good. It has always been the thing that was put to one side when real life took over. Various Cabinet Secretaries have done it from time to time, but, as I say, it never connected, in my experience, with the rest of the system.

My third point is on prosperity. I think that prosperity has been brought in in the last several years, and it has diluted the focus because there are now so many people present [*Inaudible.*] Has my connection gone, or am I back?

Baroness Neville-Jones: You are back.

Lord McDonald of Salford: On China, prosperity and security have been clashing for years. At various points, we thought we had managed to synthesise it, and then it turns out that we had not. We had two completely separate decisions in 2020 about 5G and Huawei, with security concerns being more evident in the second set of decisions than in the first set.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Getting that balance is probably the big challenge of our generation. You say that committees are not the thing and too many people in the room are not the thing, so what is the way for the NSC to come up with the right agenda for its priorities and the questions that it needs to answer? Should Ministers themselves have their own serious discussion of what they think their priorities are and then stick to them? How would you formulate the agenda?

Bronwen Maddox: I would not oppose that at all. I would encourage them to take the big picture view and say, "Look, we want to come up with an approach for the UK about how we and other democracies handle our relations with many other countries, including very autocratic ones. We've got some big questions about China and Russia. We have still unanswered questions about how to deal with the more chaotic bits of the world. We need to formulate a strategy for this. Okay, how are we going to break down this question? Let's pick the three or four main things that we want to do".

As Simon said, when you have things like prosperity—and, indeed, climate change, which is worthy of an enormous amount of attention but not perhaps there—you have to focus on those questions, and they are plenty complicated enough. Then there may be reason for lots of people in the room, but at least you would have a strong sense of purpose about why they were in the room.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Do you want to add to that, Simon?

Lord McDonald of Salford: The only thing I would add, which is already a theme from me, is that too many people in the room means that no one is brought into the decisions, in my experience. A small group of Ministers with a small group of officials, with a piece of paper that makes them choose, as Bronwen sets out, would be very helpful. If you have 15 Ministers and 15 to 30 officials, I do not think that is right.

Bronwen Maddox: The IfG has written a lot about accountability. It is harder to get accountability the more diffuse the discussion is. Obviously, there is a balance. Many of these things are, absolutely rightly, cross-cutting issues. The Government are slowly getting better at dealing with those, but it is important to keep hold of the accountability and the sense of getting it done at the same time.

Baroness Neville-Jones: I have one final thought. When the NSC was being set up and work was being done on that, there was thought about whether we should have an economic affairs council. I will not take that any further, but the issue that you are raising—how big is the spread?—has been there from the very beginning.

Bronwen Maddox: Yes.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Thank you.

Q73 **Baroness Henig:** Good afternoon, both. The fusion doctrine has already been mentioned, and I want to focus on it in a bit more detail. It was, of course, introduced in the 2018 national security capability review. Lord McDonald, in your regular involvement in the National Security Council, did you see any change in the way it worked in practice after the doctrine had been introduced?

Lord McDonald of Salford: Not a huge amount, honestly. I felt that the fusion doctrine was advocating the co-ordination that should be there in any case. There were great examples beforehand and there were lamentable examples beforehand, and I felt that that pretty much continued, although people were more focused on co-ordinating properly and were helping rather than empire building. It was good that people were more conscious about that. A lot of the fusion doctrine was imploring people to do things that they should already have been doing in the collective interest.

Baroness Henig: Bronwen, you have already touched on this. From the outside, has the Institute for Government been able to detect any change in national security policy-making as a result of the doctrine?

Bronwen Maddox: No. We thought it was timely because of the rise in the number of questions that properly stretched across departments. To that extent, I would say that there was something new about it. It spoke to the moment and the rise of a lot of these big, big questions. Brexit was obviously one of them, but not the only one; there was climate change as well, and a lot that were mainly in the security domain.

Mark Sedwill as Cabinet Secretary put in a great deal of effort to try to get departments to sign up to it. That they did not was in some cases partly territorial instinct on the part of senior officials, who did not want to. There was a degree of not being as helpful over that to the Cabinet Secretary as perhaps they might have been. We saw more of that than you might think.

Lord McDonald of Salford: Could I have a second go, Baroness Henig? This is clearly the right thing to do, but people lose sight of the second part of Mark Sedwill's ambition. It was not only how the existing machinery worked together. He was very interested in the number of ministries that were playing. In the last generation, the number of departments of state has grown. Last year, we had the combination, or the recombination, of FCO and DfID. Mark was also interested in further consolidation.

Looking at that agenda again might address some of what Bronwen has just been saying. If you have too many Ministers and too many senior officials pursuing too much of a personal agenda, the good stuff gets lost. Maybe the system needs to be a bit smaller. Through the 19th century, when the UK was, if not running the world, running a quarter of the world, we never had more than 16 members of the Cabinet.

Baroness Henig: If I could bring it up to date, the integrated review now envisages "deeper integration across government". Do you interpret that as an acknowledgement that fusion did not go far enough, or do you think that national security issues are even more interconnected now than they were in 2018?

Bronwen Maddox: Both. I do not think it went far enough, partly because the Whitehall structure, with very strong departments and Ministers whose personal achievements and profile are very much identified with that department, acts in the opposite direction. It takes an awful lot of time, as well as force of personality, to start changing that. Mark Sedwill did not have a lot of time for doing that, and perhaps not in some cases as much help from some of the Permanent Secretaries as a Cabinet Secretary might reasonably expect. There are many institutional reasons why it is really hard to do that. Also, as you said in your question, the issues and the national security issues straddle departments in a very pronounced way. I think that will go on.

Baroness Henig: But if that is the case, surely there needs to be some way of getting a much clearer focus. As you said earlier, how you frame the issues is going to be key to this, is it not?

Bronwen Maddox: Some of the issues forced themselves on us. We will have to work out our approach to China; indeed, I think the Government are making considerable progress on that. It is impossible to overstate how much of the space where we might normally be talking about foreign policy and national security has been hoovered up by coronavirus. I would expect that to reassert itself; I think people see the need for

defining at least a few of those issues and trying to get to grips with them.

Baroness Henig: Thank you very much.

Q74 **Baroness Hodgson of Abinger:** Good afternoon. I want to ask about the role of the National Security Adviser and the importance of their previous experience. Until quite recently, the Government were planning to have someone as the National Security Adviser who did not have a lot of national security experience—perhaps none—or had very little. How do you think that the National Security Council would have coped with that? Would the systems and structures have worked in spite of having somebody with very little experience? Would it have affected the outcomes and the decisions?

Lord McDonald of Salford: Could I go first, Bronwen?

Bronwen Maddox: As you like. I have a lot to say on this.

Lord McDonald of Salford: I guessed you would. I will nip in first. I think that people need to look at the apostolic succession a bit more closely, because the longest-serving National Security Adviser had a very similar career profile to David Frost's. He was someone who had been in Brussels for most of his career, and the EU part of Brussels rather than the NATO part of Brussels.

Of course, it is desirable for the person to be immersed in a wide range of national security issues. I do not think anybody can be immersed in the full range, because careers are not long enough. What has kept it going is having a really good person with really good clout in the system and really good connections. David Frost might have been able to do that. I certainly do not think it should be assumed that he could not have done that, because Kim Darroch was from the same stable.

A key point I would like to make before Bronwen comes in is that National Security Adviser is a full-time job. Theresa May and Mark decided to double hat, and I think that impaired efficiency more than CV.

Bronwen Maddox: I agree. I do not think that the double-hatting helped the stature of the role; you do not want the world to think that it can be done part-time. That said, what is important is the degree of experience. The problem with David Frost was not that he was political or close to the Prime Minister; it was the lack of that particular kind of experience. Obviously, he had a great deal of some kinds of experience.

You need someone who understands how the system works, particularly Washington, the EU, China and Russia and how to work with them, how to get a deal, how to resolve a conflict—conflict in its widest sense—and how to resolve a dispute. It is someone who has a feel for what decision-making is like in Beijing and Moscow, not just bringing British assumptions to that.

That matters even more now that we are outside the EU. We really need someone in that post who has a sense of how the world works, to enable us, as I said at the beginning, to do what I think is the key element of the job, which is to help the Prime Minister forge an approach for the UK in dealing with its threats and navigating those relationships.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Thank you both very much for that. Can I ask you both whether you see any particular pros or cons of putting the NSC on a statutory footing? What are your views on that?

Lord McDonald of Salford: I have always liked the flexibility of the British system.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Quite right.

Bronwen Maddox: Flexibility works at the moment. I would be prepared to reverse. British flexibility, as we have seen, can be flexibility too far, until the whole world is raising its eyebrows at whether there are any rules or principles underpinning our constitutional arrangements at all. At the moment, it works. I think it is something that should stay in question.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Lovely. Thank you both very much.

Q75 **Lord King of Bridgwater:** You may have seen the recently published integrated review, which talks about reviewing the national security risk assessment methodology. What is wrong with the present system?

Bronwen Maddox: It has not done a particularly good job of highlighting the risks that in the end turn out to face us. I would question whether in fact it can. As we were discussing a moment ago, forecasting the future, even for those who do it for a living, as I used to do at the beginning of my career, does not always get you far. Looking back over the subject matter that we are talking about now, as I was saying, 30 years ago we were very much looking at rivalry between great powers, and just 15 years ago it was as if that subject had gone and it was all about terrorism and counterterrorism.

Now we are back, in a sense, to talking about rivalry between great powers. These things shift. Even things we think are big building blocks of our approach to the world shift remarkably fast and in a way that is very hard to foresee. I think the integrated review did quite a good job of it. That is one point to bear in mind.

Readiness to change direction matters enormously, given that one cannot foresee things, and not being too specific. There was a lot of pandemic planning, but for the wrong kind of pandemic. For example, because it was for flu, our PPE, of which we had quite a lot, did not happen to include visors and gowns because that was not relevant for that, nor was it cast wide enough to allow the Department for Education to contemplate schools ever closing, which it did not seem to have done.

I think our risk planning has both claimed too much about what can be foreseen and been oddly too specific at the same time. It is always the

hazard. You extrapolate from what you have now. Realising the shortcomings of the process is important. Building in an ability to change direction fast when the threats change, as they will, is also important.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Is that what they mean by reviewing the methodology: the way they have gone about it? Part of the integrated review I find completely incomprehensible. Can you translate this sentence for me: "all aspects of the underlying methodology, including how we account for interdependencies, cascading and compound risks"?

Bronwen Maddox: It needs a bit of translation. It is exactly the kind of sentence I remove from IfG reports.

Lord King of Bridgwater: I do not know if you or Simon can manage to translate it for me.

Lord McDonald of Salford: I did not know that we had subcontracted drafting to Donald Rumsfeld. It is a puzzle, because it is a puzzling sentence.

Lord King of Bridgwater: I have to say that it is not the only puzzling sentence in the integrated review. What do you think needs changing about the methodology? Do you think that the Foreign Office has the right ways of going about it and checking that people are sticking to what they said?

Lord McDonald of Salford: I will take a stab at this. There is more information available. There are more datasets available incorporating all the flood of new information. We are doubling the amount of information ever dreamt up every two or three years at the moment. Siphoning what matters into our policy-making processes is something we are not particularly good at and need to get better at. I suspect that is what the authors were driving at.

Lord King of Bridgwater: It was trying to enhance their capability for risk planning, was it not? How much challenge was there during the process? Were people going back and saying, "This is what you thought were the risks we faced"? How regularly were they reviewed?

Lord McDonald of Salford: This review was after I had left, so I was not involved in it.

Lord King of Bridgwater: What about the risk planning when you were there?

Lord McDonald of Salford: As I have already said, it was examined from time to time, but never to the satisfaction of the people in the room or the audience that we were trying to address. I think Bronwen has set out the reasons why. It is very difficult to get right, even when you are close, and I think we were very close on the pandemic. I took part in an exercise 18 months ago. It was very persuasive for a flu pandemic, but, as we learned, what was right for a flu pandemic, although not a million

miles wrong for a coronavirus, was sufficiently wrong for us to feel collectively as though we had failed in our risk assessment.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Margaret, do you think I could come in on this one? It is only because, with great respect, I disagree with Tom and with both our guests. I think that element in the integrated review is an absolutely essential component of looking at risk and one that has been missed before. It is meaningful to me. Basically, it is because we now live in a networked world, and therefore the attitude of examining risk as isolated autonomous risks, when we now know that they are all interconnected in more ways than ever before, means that they have a cascading effect outwards.

During the pandemic, as Bronwen said, we had to consider what would happen with schools, what would happen with the economy, and what would happen with vaccines. There are several risks now coming together. That is why I have asked the question of several of our witnesses. I would be interested in the views of our witnesses today. I thank them for their contributions so far.

When it comes to future financial expenditure and so on, we have an independent office that looks at the Budget and gives its independent objective advice to the Government. It thus avoids the Civil Service doing all that in case the Civil Service plays into decisions that it thinks its political masters would want. In the National Audit Office, we have an independent body that assists by examining expenditure and so on, and takes it, at least to some extent, out of the hands of the Civil Service.

My personal view will be plain. I think there is also a role for an independent element to risk assessment to incorporate what the integrated defence review suggests, which is a much more sophisticated and interrelated assessment of risks. Of course, it would not be able to determine. It would be up to the civil servants and ultimately Ministers to determine, but it could play a useful role, in my view, given the failures we have had in the past.

I accept that we cannot see the future. I accept that with security in particular there will be elements that it could not go public on. I wonder if you think, given our track record on this, that there is a case for an independent body and, rather than just looking at it in the way we have with the old methodology, with a list of individual risks and then prioritising them, seeing it in a much more interconnected fashion that reflects the modern world.

Bronwen Maddox: That is a really interesting proposition. I would love to be converted by it. I am for independence in all kinds of domains, but I find it hard to feel that lack of independence is the problem compared to difficulty in prioritising.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Sorry. I do not think it is the only problem, Bronwen.

Bronwen Maddox: Yes, right.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: I think the methodology that has been used up to this point in the Cabinet Office, which does these things, has been far too narrow. I hate to use the expression "not fit for purpose", because it has hung around my neck for the last 15 years, but it is 15 to 20 years out of date. It does not relate to the interconnected world. It is not just travel, cyber and so on. That method of prioritisation does not quite capture the risks.

Bronwen Maddox: I am sceptical of the hierarchy-of-risks approach, which seems to me potentially too narrow. I am still pondering what advantages an independent assessment would bring. I was thinking as you were talking of the large quantities of independent scientific advice and risk analysis that the Government have had during coronavirus, whether they wanted it or not sometimes. It has certainly added something to everyone's ability to judge risks for ourselves, but I am not sure whether it would have changed the Government's planning. I am not sure whether having an independent body on this kind of risk would lead to radically better decisions. Sitting here, I would be delighted to be persuaded, but I have not taken in enough of what you mean to be convinced at this point.

Lord McDonald of Salford: I am a sceptic, too. My fear is that, if it is handed to something independent, we feel yoked to that, and maybe then we make a different set of wrong decisions, because however good the independent—

Lord Reid of Cardowan: But we do it with the future of the economy. We ask the Office for Budget Responsibility to do it with the most important thing about our future, which is the economy. We do it with expenditure with the National Audit Office. They do not determine it.

Lord McDonald of Salford: The optimism bias affects even independent bodies.

Bronwen Maddox: The OBR says, "We're not making forecasts. We're taking the Government's figures and extrapolating from that", which is different.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: But it does so outside government, and it reaches conclusions very often that are different from the Government's and different from civil servants'. It does not determine what the Government do from that advice.

The Chair: It is an interesting thought, but we may be taking a little step away from the discussion. I am sure everybody will ponder it. Lord King, have you finished?

Lord King of Bridgwater: I think John Reid pushed me out of the way, so you can carry on.

The Chair: Okay. It is actually Lord Reid whose question comes next.

Q76 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** In due deference to Lord King, I will ask another question, which is on resilience. The integrated review spent a lot of time on resilience. I do not want to get into the same discussion, although I thought the definition of resilience was very traditional, very narrow and again out of date, but let us leave that aside. They mentioned it constantly. In 111 pages, they brought up resilience 84 times. They also brought it up on health resilience, economic resilience and so on. There were any number of them. One of the key things that it promised in the integrated review was to develop national resilience strategy with the devolved Administrations, local government, the public and the private sector. How different is that from what we have currently, and how feasible is it to encompass the perspectives all those external stakeholders?

Bronwen Maddox: I think it is difficult to bring all those in and produce something that is then called a coherent map of resilience, if you like. That is a lot of stakeholders with very different perspectives. As you said, the integrated review says a great deal about resilience and about the integration of all these concerns. It mentions, among other things, the integration of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with DfID. It is now the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. I think it is important that they consult widely, but in the end they will have to make a set of decisions about resilience, and those may not reflect all those stakeholders.

Lord McDonald of Salford: I agree. The only thing I would add, as well as the difficulty of corralling stakeholders whose interests are so clearly different from each other, is that one reason to stress resilience is that the centre has become a lot thinner in recent years. Most of the line ministries at the centre coping with the coronavirus crisis are smaller than they were before at a very basic level.

Bronwen Maddox: I took a lot of the talk about resilience in the integrated review as aspirational, but it did not go into detail in many places about how exactly all this was to be integrated.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Should that worry us? The concept of resilience has been around since 2001. It was done by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the Cabinet Office on instructions from Blair during the first big fuel strike, which almost brought the country to a standstill, yet here we are 20 years later and Simon is saying, "Well, the people involved in it were very small in number", and you are saying the concept has not been developed. I am not blaming either of you, incidentally; I am just trying to get to the bottom of this.

Take the private sector. It is obvious that the Government believe that our response to the pandemic has been a huge success, allegedly because of greed and competition and the private sector. Let us leave aside the NHS, the state involvement in vaccines, the distribution by the Army, the development by the universities and so on. Even the one in the private sector, AstraZeneca, has been producing it not for profit but actually at cost price.

Leave all that aside. Do you think that we are heading towards more involvement of the private sector, for good or bad, in the development of our national resilience, as we had to do for cyber, for instance, in the national infrastructure? CPNI has to involve the private sector because of its use there. Do you think we are on our way to that? Do you think it would work?

Bronwen Maddox: Is this a question principally about the private sector? You had a long parenthesis of "Leave aside all this public sector stuff". Leave it aside for the purposes of this question? It does not seem to me that the Government are leaving it aside at all. Indeed, most of their thinking about resilience is about the public sector, and about whether to build more capacity into health in particular. They have done a great deal of thinking about resilience. The coronavirus has told us how tightly run public services were, immensely efficient but with very little resilience and room for resilience when this thing hit. I can leave aside all that, but that is where a lot of the energy and thinking is going at the moment, it seems to me, in conclusions from coronavirus—into the public sector stuff.

You asked about the private sector. Will it play a role? Yes, it is bound to. One of the things that it offers, sometimes, is speed of response and agility in changing direction when something does not work. That is one of the qualities that you need to respond to threats that may be unforeseen or may themselves be changing fast, as the actual nature of the virus may be changing. That speed is very valuable, particularly if Governments can work with it. A lot of the IT and the speed of digital transformation that many of us, and many people's jobs, have gone through, is to do with the private sector.

One of the points we have made at the institute, for all the brickbats thrown at a lot of what the Government have done in this, is to look at a lot of the years of government planning. The planning and investment that stretches over many Governments—a couple of decades—has paid off.

On the things that people have sweated over, and many things that have been painful—universal credit, HMRC computer systems and stuff—actually, the years of work that went into them paid off. The Government were able to get money into people's bank accounts very quickly. Data systems were up and running very fast. For all that we are having a slightly gloomy conversation about the inability to plan things and lack of resilience and so on, one of the positive lessons I would take from coronavirus is that planning and investment work, and we have seen that in many domains; one of them digital, but that is not the only one.

Lord McDonald of Salford: Can I add two points? First, in my experience, involving the private sector is very expensive. Especially if you need the private sector in a hurry, you spend a huge amount of money. What is given to the private sector and what is left in the public sector? You need to consider the money.

The second thing is that we are beating ourselves up. I have been following the response of Governments around the world. Basically, all Governments have had a really difficult coronavirus, apart from Governments in very isolated countries—generally islands several hours flight from anywhere else—or authoritarian Governments. If you take those out, the whole world has been having a very difficult 18 months. In some ways, the UK has done better, not across the board, but our coronavirus experience is typical of, or in some ways better than, much of the rest of the world.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: We have the fifth highest death rate in the world.

Lord McDonald of Salford: But now the virus—

Lord Reid of Cardowan: It is getting better.

Lord McDonald of Salford: The vaccine rollout is astonishing.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Yes, I know. Okay.

Q77 **Lord Brennan:** The pandemic has been highly significant in challenging our population to wonder how as a society it will combat such events for the future. It is all very well to talk about resilience, to unite, to cope, to survive, but the resilient citizen will say, "But what is the plan? What are the Government going to do?" We have learned about the NHS, vaccine manufacture, et cetera, as Lord Reid mentioned. When the Government talk about a whole-of-society approach to resilience, I think they mean a whole-of-society readiness to meet real crises.

I would like to ask Lord McDonald and Bronwen to consider these words from Sir David Omand in giving evidence about this issue. He talked about tackling national security issues by whole-of-nation efforts and said that "the National Security Adviser must be given the authority to integrate the necessary UK efforts to manage specific risks at national, devolved, local, business and international levels". That is from an ex-head of GCHQ. Just think about cyberattacks, with which we have been concerned on this committee, and energy, finance and banking, healthcare. We have had examples of all three on a specific, not a generalised, basis.

Lastly, as to what to do, surely the national security concept now has to include not just risk in foreign policy and general military response, but how to cope with it if it occurs—the management of reasonably expected consequences. Whatever we thought in the past, times have changed, and the system surely needs to change with it.

Lord McDonald of Salford: Thank you, Lord Brennan. I agree with Sir David that a national response is highly desirable, but one of the most striking things to me in our management of this crisis is that the difference among the four nations of the United Kingdom is more obvious and more important than ever. However desirable a United Kingdom

response reaction plan for the future is, I fear that our experience of this crisis will make that more difficult.

Bronwen Maddox: I entirely agree with your last comment, Lord Brennan, about our building in an assessment of how to manage these things at the same time as identifying them. That has to be right. Like Simon McDonald, I find it hard to see what an overall single, national response would be; he did not put it quite that way. People have such different responses to all these things. We have had a remarkable degree of unity in the response to lockdown and to the pandemic, but parts of the UK have different feelings. Different regions of England have different feelings. Different sectors do. Different age groups absolutely do. I am not sure how far I can take that particular line of yours, but I entirely agree with what you were saying at the end.

Lord Brennan: I realise that this is a very difficult challenge for both of you, but in the integrated review there is actually talk of nuclear response to non-military attack. Any citizen would say of the thing that appears to be at stake, "What about me?"

Lord McDonald of Salford: As a private citizen, I disagree strongly with that line of argument in the review. I do not think it is real. I do not think it is helpful. I do not think it should have been in there.

Bronwen Maddox: There was as close to a national response in the lines that Simon said as you could possibly wish for on that one.

Q78 **Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho:** Richard Graham touched on groupthink in his supplementary to the first question, or maybe you mentioned it, Lord McDonald. Clearly, we are living in a time when people finally realise the critical importance of diversity and inclusion. In the integrated review, they make reference to the mission-critical initiative and its toolkit. I am sorry, I am not familiar with that, but I am interested in whether you think that either that or other mechanisms are working, and particularly if departments or agencies need to put more focus on diversity and inclusion and what the dangers might be if they do not.

Lord McDonald of Salford: I think all Permanent Secretaries realise the importance of that initiative and are signed up. One of the real issues with groupthink at the NSC or NSC(O) table was that the departments they were representing were pretty un-diverse. The Permanent Secretaries had to take the agenda one step away from that table and apply it in their departments.

The Foreign Office has been trying to change things since before Margaret Beckett was the Foreign Secretary. It has taken a long time, but I think that things have shifted significantly in recent years, so that, by the end of this year, half the ambassadors in G20 countries will be women, all the ambassadors in P5 countries will be women, all the ambassadors in G7 countries will be women, and for the first time ever we have three people from ethnic minorities on the FCO board. But that is on the back of 20 years' work, and I know that such work is replicated in other

departments. Being replicated there, I think the discussion will become better at the NSC and NSC(O) table.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: Are there any departments or agencies that you would particularly call out that still have much more work to do?

Lord McDonald of Salford: I can, because the new chief of SIS has made a big impact in his first five months, but until Richard Moore arrived I would say that SIS was lagging. The new chief is making a difference already.

Bronwen Maddox: It is moving really slowly. It may have been speeding up a bit in the past year, because a lot of organisations have more attention on it. The sense of pressure and transparency is beginning to have effects, but it is painfully slow.

If I was looking for what could be done more quickly, I think the Government's interest in relocating jobs outside London could help quite a lot, particularly if it was done with this in mind, and not just relocating people who are currently working in London but hiring from other parts of the UK. It could be done with a view to increasing not only ethnic minority voices within the discussions but the voices of people from many other parts of the UK, which has a strength in itself.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: Yes. Thank you. Lord McDonald, Gordon Brown created national security forums to engage the private sector and others, I think, with the work of the National Security Council. Do you think they worked? I know we have talked a little bit about the role of the private sector and involving more engagement from other places. Do you think that was a successful way of doing it? Are there other ways in which we could consult and engage?

Lord McDonald of Salford: It was an honourable and well-intentioned effort, but I do not think it worked because I do not think it connected with the rest of the machine. Any such addition has to connect and be seen to connect for folk to get interested and excited about it.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: Thank you.

Q79 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Good afternoon, witnesses. As Bronwen Maddox remarked earlier, matters shift quite quickly and are hard to foresee. Clearly, we have to have some cognisance of what the devolved Governments are doing. As Lord Reid said, we live in a networked world and we live in an interconnected world. How, or should, the national security apparatus, as it is termed, interplay with, say, the Republic of Ireland next door, or indeed the Isle of Man to a lesser extent, in this locality? Any thoughts on that?

Bronwen Maddox: That was not where I thought you were going to end that question, which I thought was about how the devolved Administrations themselves might interconnect.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I would go beyond the devolveds and just the

general locality we are in. If we are in this networked, interconnected world, what thought should be given to that? That may be an unforeseen round about us, too.

Bronwen Maddox: That is an important point. We are in the locality we are in, and we have many common issues about security threats, migration and so on. There are fairly regular contacts. I cannot speak for the Isle of Man. Discussions with the Republic of Ireland on many fronts are close. Brexit has given even more chance for those discussions, obviously not always happily. The frequency of discussion does not seem to me the problem.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Thank you. Lord McDonald, do you have any observations on that?

Lord McDonald of Salford: The relationship with the Republic of Ireland had quite simply become better and stronger since the Good Friday agreement. Much of the progress feels as though it is in peril right now. All the Irish colleagues I meet are aware of that. They regret that. They do not want it to deteriorate, but they are painfully conscious of that possibility. My point is that it needs work, and I know that the system is alive to that fact. A great deal of attention now is being paid to the relationship with the Republic of Ireland. I am afraid I cannot comment on the Isle of Man.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Are the capabilities there for that work to happen successfully? Are the personnel there?

Lord McDonald of Salford: Yes, I think there are very good people involved. There is the Northern Ireland Office. There is the embassy in Dublin, and it is one of the subjects traditionally where No. 10 is present.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: By extension from that area, if opinion polls are to be believed in Scotland, Scotland is heading for independence. What planning has been done for that, and what planning for co-operation and mutual security needs to happen in that event? Should Westminster or the current UK Government be preparing for interaction not just with Dublin but with Edinburgh?

Bronwen Maddox: Speaking personally, that feels premature. A great deal of discussion would have to happen with Scotland if there were a referendum and then an independence vote—all kinds of things: how to treat the border, how to treat the debt and how to treat the fiscal position of Scotland. Defence is one part of that. It is a part that people looking at the potential for Scottish independence look at very carefully. We are putting out a report this week on the Scottish and Welsh deficits that they support. There is Northern Ireland. There is all that. Should the UK right now get into a discussion with Scotland about how—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Should they start thinking about it?

Bronwen Maddox: This is all a discussion about national security. I must say I find it unhelpful to bring the union into a discussion of national security. It is a union of consent.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: It should remain so.

Bronwen Maddox: Absolutely.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: It should not be a union of the jailed, for instance.

Bronwen Maddox: It is a political union. You do not want to discuss the break-up of the UK as part of a national security conversation. If you are asking whether the rest of the UK should discuss now how it would approach the defence of Scotland and what offer it makes, it feels to me a tad premature, but maybe only a touch.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Yes, because of the way polls are going. Lord McDonald?

Lord McDonald of Salford: Speaking personally, I agree with Bronwen. I think it is premature. My learning would be that, if Scotland votes for independence, there should be proper preparation time, because the issues involved in that divorce are older and deeper than the issues between the UK and the EU. Our learning from the divorce from the EU was that the time that we had to prepare was not enough. If Scotland votes for independence, the preparation between that date and the actual independence day would need to be substantial.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: In response, surely people would not want to be blind-sided and would want to be prepared so that the co-operation structures would be like Ireland, and would be better and stronger than ever when that day arrives—as I would see it, a happy day.

Lord McDonald of Salford: The union we live in is a union I am happy to live in.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: We will leave that to the good people of Scotland when they have their referendum. Thank you.

The Chair: Lord Brennan, I believe you wanted to come in on this.

Lord Brennan: No, it has been covered. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Q80 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** On that very last discussion, it seems to me that any discussion of the union is a matter for the Cabinet, not for the NSC.

Can I come back to the question of risk planning? Lord Reid has taken us through quite a lot of that subject. I want to try to bring it down slightly to the manageable. How do you go about actually trying to increase risk management, planning against risk and the functioning of government in

risk planning?

It seems to me that the integrated review is incoherent in talking at one moment about the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, about which it does not say very much. I think that it is partly because it has never had a very clear role in the constellation of other bodies that have grown up since. What is the relationship between that and the responsibility that is laid on departments, the lead government department or the government departments responsible for their own security planning? Do you have views on how government machinery should organise itself?

I would be interested in whether you think government departments do the risk planning and security management that is laid upon them or whether you think in fact it goes by the board. How would you try to construct some machinery in government that would actually ensure that there is a bit more planning on a departmental basis for the various risks that have security implications for which government departments are responsible?

Bronwen Maddox: I would start by publishing it when big risk studies are done. Some of the pandemic planning was not entirely published. I am thinking of the Cygnus work. Departments did not know that it had been identified that communication between departments was one of the weaknesses, and it was harder for them to prepare because of that.

The Chair: Was it a waste of time?

Bronwen Maddox: It is not always joined up. They go through the motions. I cannot think of a department that does not tell you a great deal about what it does every year in assessing risks, RAG ratings and so on. I am thinking of the Department for Education. I do not feel it is unfair to single it out, because it had a particularly bumpy route through last year. It did not seem to have dealt in any detail with some of the implications of the risks that were being discussed quite widely—

Baroness Neville-Jones: Did it bring the teachers in?

Bronwen Maddox: —for example, whether there were ever circumstances in which you would have to shut schools or cancel exams.

Baroness Neville-Jones: But that is an example, is it not, of where you could describe it as teachers not being the private sector but where you have to bring in an external party. Did that actually happen? This is one of the issues. If a department is responsible for a whole area of government planning for emergencies, it has to talk to all sorts of non-departmental individuals who work in the sector. In the example you take, did any discussion go wider than the department talking to itself?

Bronwen Maddox: I am not aware that there was, but that may well not be comprehensive. We are running a series of round tables on what happened about that, and there will be a report on what happened in that department last year.

Baroness Neville-Jones: It is a very difficult area, I think.

Bronwen Maddox: It is very difficult and it is very diffuse, but it needs a degree of central planning of risks. It is clear that they had not done that thinking: "What if we actually have to shut schools?"

Baroness Neville-Jones: Are you aware of much ministerial interest in and oversight of all this planning?

Bronwen Maddox: Of the different departments?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes. Is any kind of audit taking place either at ministerial level or anywhere else in the system?

Bronwen Maddox: Because of coronavirus?

Baroness Neville-Jones: No, generally of departmental planning against risk and in the security domain.

Bronwen Maddox: Things are so dominated by coronavirus at the moment, quite rightly, and to some extent with Brexit that—

Baroness Neville-Jones: But historically?

Bronwen Maddox: Those two things now shadow that. There is a great deal of analysis of whether more could have been done for those things, and there is beginning to be quite a lot of analysis of what lessons can be learned from those two things. Some of the Brexit planning helped the coronavirus response—for example, with medicine supply and so on. There is a great deal of thinking going on, but is there thinking in the abstract? A lot of abstract, more hypothetical stuff has been squeezed out this year.

Baroness Neville-Jones: But the implication—

Lord McDonald of Salford: Sorry to interject, but I have two quick supplementary points. First, I think the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, COBRA, is a pretty good part of the system for convening the rest of the system. The technology works, everyone knows what it is, and everyone snaps to when COBRA grips a smaller crisis than coronavirus. It has a good brand.

Secondly, in the FCO, a year ago what we needed most of all was our very good people to do things that they had not trained for but to get with the programme quickly. They were able overnight to become the world's biggest travel agency. It was not something that I think anybody had trained for. When the problem was presented of how to get 1.3 million people back to the UK—before we knew that actually it was a much safer option to stay in New Zealand—the quality of staff responding quickly to something unexpected and unplanned for was an important feature of coping with the crisis.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Has that bit of machinery that you built in response to that crisis now been incorporated as a permanent feature of FCO operations?

Lord McDonald of Salford: It will [*Inaudible.*]—

The Chair: We have lost you.

Lord McDonald of Salford: It grew to be more than a third of the staff in King Charles Street.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Presumably, you would not want emergency machinery operating at emergency levels all the time.

Lord McDonald of Salford: Correct.

Baroness Neville-Jones: It seems to me that one of the lessons that one needs to learn from these episodes is that a lot of things you learn then need to be incorporated in the capability of the department in the longer term, so that it can resurrect things from crises it has experienced in the past. You cannot have emergency temporary activity every time there is a crisis of some kind. Then you go back to "the status quo ante". It seems to me that the status quo ante then ought not to be regarded as the future status quo. What do you think about that?

Bronwen Maddox: I have one point of reassurance. I think there is quite a lot of evidence that departments and public services that are used to dealing with emergencies—the police, the prisons, the health service itself—found all this much easier to handle in their management systems. They got messages out much more easily than much more diffuse organisations like the Department for Education with schools and, indeed, social care. They struggled much more. That is not to sell the advantages of central control in everything, because there were clearly aspects where central control was not the answer to the problem. The emergency planning and the strengths of that worked.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Thank you.

Q81 **Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:** First, Lord McDonald, to return to the past perhaps, the integrated review talked about developing outcome delivery plans for each department. How feasible do you think it would be to identify and measure outcomes in a national security context, and what sort of metrics would you suggest for national security? Would a travel agency be one of them perhaps?

Lord McDonald of Salford: No, I do not think that is our continuing purpose. Speaking privately, as I now can, I do not really get outcome delivery in the national security space. Peace is what we are aiming for. If it is peaceful, we are doing our job at some level. I scratched my head reading that. I really do not see the metrics. Perhaps it is more an art than a science. I know that is not where the authors were, but it is where I am.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Thank you. Bronwen Maddox, your report in January, *The Heart of the Problem*, said that in recent years, particularly since the abolition of the delivery unit, the Cabinet Office has not been strong enough to hold departments to account for

implementation. Do you think the re-establishment of the delivery unit could be used for chasing up implementation on the national security front? How might that affect [*Interruption.*] the Prime Minister's implementation unit?

Bronwen Maddox: I am so sorry. I did not hear the last bit.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Do you think that the re-establishment of the delivery unit could be used for chasing up implementation on the national security front?

Bronwen Maddox: It could be helpful. We are gentle supporters of delivery units, but it depends on what support they get from the Prime Minister.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: I remember that when Tony Blair set up the delivery unit it was given a lot of status, and departments had to pay attention to it.

Bronwen Maddox: The status comes from the Prime Minister, not from the name and not from the construction. Having said that, if it has prime ministerial will behind it, it can get things done and it can bring a focus.

What matters is building in implementation right from the beginning of thinking. The things that worked well in the coronavirus pandemic had implementation built in from the first discussion. I am thinking of the furlough scheme and the self-employed support scheme where—going back to the who-is-in-the-room question—people from HMRC who often would not have been in the same room as the Treasury people were in the discussion right from the beginning about how things would be structured and how the money would get to people really quickly.

That was different from some of the other discussions, where implementation was almost an afterthought. It is building it in right from the beginning of the thinking of whatever it is that really matters. Delivery units can help. Structures can help. I said right at the beginning that the particular structure we have been discussing today, that of the NSC and the NSA, has worked. They are not a cure-all for everything and they are not a substitute for either political desire to get something done or a commitment or the right person in the job, but they can be supportive, to take our Chair's word.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Thank you very much.

Q82 **Lord King of Bridgwater:** You will both be glad to hear that we are on the last lap. I want to ask you about something in the integrated review that talks about establishing a situation centre for "live data, analysis and insights to the decision-makers on what is happening in the UK and around the world, strengthening our ability to identify, understand and respond to national security issues and crises". Do either of you know how that is supposed to link with COBRA and the National Security Council? What exactly will its role be?

Lord McDonald of Salford: I do not think we know. It is absolutely vital that it acknowledges or hooks into the existing structures. There is COBRA, and there is the crisis centre in the FCDO. If this is a rival, I wonder what useful function it would play. It felt to me like something that was consciously trying to ape parts of the US system. I do not think we necessarily need to do that.

Lord King of Bridgwater: I thought it was an unfair question. I do not know if Bronwen wants to come in.

Bronwen Maddox: No, I do not. I think Simon put it perfectly. He is right to pick up on the echoes of the situation room, no doubt intended. I have nothing to add.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Understood. I wondered. All will no doubt be revealed in due course. It is going to cost us 10 million quid a year, I think. Whatever it is going to be, that is the figure that was provided in the Budget for it. Thank you very much.

The Chair: I am strongly reminded that many years ago, when we were still in opposition, I was prone to say to business audiences that I heard from the private sector that with every new Minister comes either a new organisation or a new set of rules for the organisations that exist. It was not praise.

Thank you very much indeed, both of you. It has been a very interesting afternoon and we have very much appreciated your willingness to come and your frankness. Thank you very much.

Bronwen Maddox: Thank you, my pleasure.

Lord McDonald of Salford: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, everybody.