

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Coronavirus: FCO response, HC 239

Tuesday 21 April 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 April 2020.

[Watch](#) the meeting

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Alicia Kearns; Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Ian Murray; Andrew Rosindell; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 51-148

Witnesses

[1](#): Sir Simon McDonald, Permanent Under-Secretary and Head of the Diplomatic Service, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Menna Rawlings, Director General for Economic and Global Issues, FCO, and Andrew Sanderson, Finance Director, FCO.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Simon McDonald, Menna Rawlings and Andrew Sanderson.

Q51 **Chair:** Order, order. Welcome to this afternoon's virtual session of the Foreign Affairs Committee, with Members of the House sitting all across the United Kingdom. I welcome our witnesses, who are regular visitors in many ways. Sir Simon McDonald is permanent under-secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and head of the diplomatic service. Menna Rawlings is director general for economic and global issues, and Andrew Sanderson is finance director.

This format for sittings of the House of Commons Select Committees is somewhat new for many of us, so please bear with us; we will try to make sure that we get through it as efficiently as we can. Colleagues, as you know, please direct questions to a particular witness, which in this case will usually be the PUS. If a question is put to all panel members, I would be grateful if you indicated which witness you want to answer it. This will require rather more discipline than usual, in the sense that everyone is muted until they are unmuted, so I will try to let people know when others are coming in.

I will start. Sir Simon, we have been under exceptional strain in recent weeks, with British citizens around the world seeking to return to the UK and to use the consular services that the Foreign Office offers. Could you tell me what improvements you have made, and might be looking to make, to ensure that those services run better?

Sir Simon McDonald: Thank you, Mr Chairman. First, you are right that this is an unprecedented challenge, so we have reoriented the whole of our effort in the UK and across the network. The consular challenge is overwhelmingly the most important. The second, and rising, is the challenge to procure PPE and ventilators, but in first place for the last six weeks has been the consular challenge.

I would first draw attention to new working practices. The Foreign Office has become, overwhelmingly, an organisation that is working remotely. That is completely new for us, but covid is a global pandemic—a threat everywhere—so we have had to change the way we work, including for our consular staff.

Secondly, and related, is our technology. Over the last several years we have had a tech overhaul programme. The fact that it was in place meant that we were able to switch seamlessly from being an organisation that was used to dealing face-to-face to an organisation working on Microsoft Teams, Zoom and the full remote panoply. Those are the two things that I would first draw attention to.

Q52 **Chair:** Can I take you back to the questions that we are looking at? First of all, huge congratulations should go to many of the staff in the network, who have done an extraordinary amount to help British citizens around the world. Forgive me, but I am going to dwell—perhaps unfairly—on the cases that seem to have led in many of our postbags: the areas in which



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the network seems not to have done so well.

As you may know, we have had a survey running on the Foreign Affairs Committee website, to which we have had more than 1,200 responses, including comments indicating that people feel that they are just a number, and that they feel ill-informed, stranded and let down—those are cases from Peru, India and Australia. The Committee realises that the network is under huge strain, but clearly there are real challenges. Perhaps you can tell us how you are coping with the current demand and what improvements you think you may need if this were to endure or reoccur?

Sir Simon McDonald: Yes, we acknowledge that there have been problems. One reason for that is that this crisis hit everywhere simultaneously. I admit that at the beginning our call centres, in particular, were not as we would have wished them to be—that was a feature of the Foreign Secretary's evidence session on 19 March. It was then the focus of a concerted effort. It took us a couple of weeks to get it right, and I suspect that the comments that you have received are mostly from people who were trying to get in touch during that fortnight. There were real problems. Many calls were not getting through and so people could be hanging on the phone for a long time.

But since 30 March our pick-up rate has been consistently at 98% or better. We have put extra people on to the call centres, in Málaga but also in London. We have repurposed FCO officers. We have used a commercial partner so that, since 30 March, there has been a much better picture. But I acknowledge that before that there were real strains, and the effort was to do better. It took longer than we wanted, but we did get there.

Q53 Chair: Can I bring you back to the initial question? What would you do differently now? I realise this is very shortly after this has started, but in the last four, five or six weeks you and your organisation must have learned an awful lot that, for understandable reasons, you didn't know six weeks ago about the pressures that could be put on the network by a global issue such as this. What have you learnt? What would you do differently?

Sir Simon McDonald: We have learned the importance of comms and of being accessible. In parallel with the call centre effort, we were changing the way we were communicating—but that was not always evident—so that, instead of communicating via individual telephone calls, much more communication was via social media, via Facebook and Twitter, so that we could let a lot of people know simultaneously what was happening. I think the switch to that mass effort has happened and has been successful, but it could have been done and could have been signposted earlier. We would certainly take that as one of the lessons learned.

One of the themes that I think will come out through this session is just how different everything has been in the last six weeks. We are an organisation that is used to crisis, and I think that particularly since the crises of the first decade of this century—9/11 and the tsunami in Bali—we have been doing better, but we are configured to deal with two crises at a



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time, and this was a crisis that was hitting the whole network simultaneously. So things have not gone as well as ideally, but I think that, looking back, we have done a good job and that the network has really stepped up.

With regard to some of the policy choices that I think your report will look at, other countries decided to move quickly to repatriation. The French and the Germans have had a series of flights since early on. The Government decided consciously to rely on commercial means for as long as possible—that people and their travel companies and insurance need to be the first port of call—and so we have done that. Others may think that we were slow to move to charters, but I think that was a good and defensible decision so that now we are providing charter help to people who have not been able to get home by commercial means.

One thing that came up when the Foreign Secretary appeared before you was the number of Brits overseas at any one time. The Foreign Secretary mentioned a figure of up to 1 million people. Now we think that the numbers overseas in the middle of March were higher than that—nearer to 1.5 million. Since then, 1.3 million have come home by commercial means, and a lot of that was facilitated by the network, by ambassadors and high commissioners being in touch with airlines and encouraging them to keep routes open, and indeed to increase the number of flights.

Our high commissioner in Australia had a particular success with Qatar Airways, which increased its capacity on routes from Australia by 2,000 seats. Our high commissioner in Islamabad has arranged extra flights with Pakistan International Airlines, which in the last week has brought 7,500 people from Pakistan.

So I think the commercial route was the right place to start, but it has now been supplemented by charter flights, as you know. The latest figures on charter returns are 12,124 British nationals on 64 flights from 20 countries, and that programme will continue for several more weeks.

Chair: Can I first pay a huge tribute to a couple of high commissions that have done exceptionally well, in Kenya and Pakistan? I had a personal constituency message from somebody in Uruguay who has nothing but thanks for the network. However, there are other areas that I know people want to touch on, so I will call, in this order, Chris Bryant, Alicia Kearns and Bob Seely. Chris, can I come to you?

Q54 **Chris Bryant:** Sir Simon, I am sure that all members of the Committee would want to thank all the valiant efforts that everybody has made, but I have to say, on behalf of a great number of MPs, that there has been a phenomenal sense of frustration, anger, distress—every negative feeling possibly. An awful lot of people have felt abandoned by the Government, and they have seen people in the same hotel as them, of other nationalities, being repatriated. Who makes the decision that we are not going to repatriate but instead rely on commercial flights first?

Sir Simon McDonald: That was a decision made by the Government. I recognise what you say, and I am sorry that your constituents and the



constituents of fellow MPs have been in that position. But I hope that over time it has improved and that most of what you are talking about was from three to six weeks ago, and that latterly the position has improved, because we have been listening and we have been changing, and we have reinforced our call centres, in order to improve connectivity with people in trouble. It is true that people of other nationalities were repatriated first by charter flights, but now we have charter flights for UK citizens as well. Given the numbers involved, and given the fact that there were these other routes, I think it was legitimate to look to commercial means first.

Q55 Chris Bryant: But I understand that Germany and France, for instance, by making decisions earlier than we did, got charter flights out of Peru at half the price we did.

Sir Simon McDonald: The position now with charters, given the weakness in the world airline market, is that they are cheaper to procure than they were at the beginning of the crisis, so our crisis centre is able to get better deals now than compared with a month ago.

Q56 Chris Bryant: But it took a very long time for Peru to get sorted. It felt like that was a really difficult pinch point and a lot of people who were in a country that in many places is very inaccessible and has a great deal of poverty were very frightened. I just don't understand why it took so long to come to the decision, which to this Committee, when we last discussed it with the Foreign Secretary, seemed inevitable.

Sir Simon McDonald: We were relying on commercial means. After that evidence session we did institute special flights, and there have now been five special flights from Peru, the last of which was in the past 24 hours. We have got our people home from Peru—those who want to come. I accept that this was slower than other countries, but I think that when you look at the size of the crisis and the amount of time that—okay, it was three weeks longer and not ideal, but it was done.

Q57 Chris Bryant: But I think the charge would come from constituents that this is always Britain's attitude—it's not just now. This is the permanent decision of the British Government, which is, "We let you be, we let you be, we let you be; you sort your own way out, unless we really, really have to", whereas France and Germany, and even Italy, Spain and other countries, will repatriate much sooner than the UK. Is that fair, do you think?

Sir Simon McDonald: A part of repatriation, as you know, Mr Bryant, is that the taxpayer pays, so travel companies and insurers should legitimately be the first to be called on. The Government has been very active with these players to remind them of their obligations and encourage them to fulfil their obligations, and the network has been very active with airlines to keep the airline system open and functioning. Many people have returned by those means, as I have already said. Those means having been exhausted, now we are doing charters.

Okay, speed is something that absolutely is in question, and you can legitimately say that we could have been quicker, but given the size at the



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beginning, and given the numbers that have successfully come back by commercial means, which would have been extremely expensive to put on charter flights, I think that this is a defensible choice.

- Q58 **Chris Bryant:** Let me just ask a question about the comms issue you referred to. Lots of people have complained, first, that they found it difficult to find the local number for the embassy or consulate, and secondly, that they found it difficult to get updated with the correct information on what they should or should not do, and so on. Should we not set up a more permanent solution whereby there is a single number, whatever country you are in, which is the number you ring for the British embassy and it automatically finds the embassy in the country that you are in? Perhaps we need something like that where you can then automatically get the information pumped back out to you on a daily basis.

Sir Simon McDonald: Comms is an area for learning and re-examination, absolutely. In the last several years, Mr Bryant, we as an organisation have centralised our comms into a call centre so that people pick up a phone wherever they are in the world and they go to the central call centre, generally in Málaga but also in Ottawa. We have discovered the limits of that. People want something more personalised, so one of the things to examine is the balance between this centralisation and tailoring.

An important element of the tailoring is on the embassy high commission websites and social media pages. Facebook and Twitter have been very important in the last six weeks in getting accurate information out as quickly as possible to as large a number of people as possible, but people did not know it was there, so publicising that is clearly important in future.

- Q59 **Alicia Kearns:** May I start by expressing our gratitude to everyone in the crisis centre and to all those in post who have been working tirelessly? I know how hard former colleagues and others have been working. My question follows on from Chris's question about communications. It is threefold. First, the biggest criticism in the response from our survey is that British nationals did not feel they were being communicated with effectively enough. What emergency communications structure was put in place? For me it means going beyond social media, because the FCO has an enormous communications network with individuals in pretty much every single post whose sole job has communications as part of their role.

Secondly, is it your assessment that the FCO was too slow to change its advice for British nationals to return to the UK? Thirdly, is travel advice currently fit for purpose? I know of many residents from my constituency and from across the country who are still travelling despite the fact that travel advice said, "Do not travel." I know that we cannot force people to adhere to it, but does travel advice need an overhaul to make it more effective or perhaps stronger, or communicated differently?

Sir Simon McDonald: First, Ms Kearns, on comms, as I have said already, we reinforced the call centres, and that was a big part of our connectivity. It took longer than we wanted to function as well as we



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wanted, but we got there by the end of March. Also, our high commissioners and ambassadors are public figures in their countries, so the picture is different in different countries, but I think I can cite lots of examples where the person at the top connected via traditional media in the country to which they were accredited. So I accept that spreading best practice is one of the lessons we must learn.

On travel advice, looking back I think we moved early and we did things that we have never done before. On 12 March we advised people over the age of 70 with underlying health conditions not to go on cruises. On 17 March we advised people not to travel overseas. On 23 March we advised people to return from overseas. Now, there can be a debate about however many days before then it should have been, but I think that was still defensible.

In parallel with those three big landmarks we changed our travel advice in March more than 1,000 times, so we did more in that single month than we did in the whole of 2019 in order to make it fit for purpose.¹ It was in response to that extraordinary volume—that increase in tempo—that these firsts were set. It was a first for the UK to say, “Don’t travel.” It was a first for the UK to say, “Come home.” Again, there could be an argument about the day we chose, but I think the days we chose were defensible.

Q60 Alicia Kearns: Just to come back on that, I do think there is a place for—I think the focus too much is on the phone lines. It is not about the reactive response to British nationals, but more the proactive. The fact is that British nationals abroad are not watching Peruvian or Guatemalan media to get travel advice on how to come home or what the situation is. It is about fundamentally recognising how British nationals trapped abroad are receiving information and making sure that they can get it.

That leads me to my second question, which is about planning exercises. Have there been planning exercises for situations such as this? When I worked at the Foreign Office, I went to Uganda to do an evacuation and repatriation exercise, but that was working on a bilateral basis. How much has been done on anything of this sort of scale, and what did it tell us? Did we adopt any of the learnings from those training sessions, and, if not, what learnings should we adopt?

Sir Simon McDonald: We do test and train regularly, but you are right that the focus of that testing and training to date has been bilateral. The biggest that I have taken part in was a NATO-wide exercise, but that is still 30 countries; this was the whole world simultaneously. So yes, this was something that we had not trained for or tested in advance, but as I am saying—and now I am repeating—I think we recognised that quickly and we have changed the organisation really out of recognition in under six weeks. You are right that there are future learnings, but we have been learning as we have been going in the last six weeks.

¹ Note by witness: The FCO published more than 1,000 updates in March and has already updated its advice more this year than in the whole of 2019.



Q61 Bob Seely: I would like to ask about repatriation too. In my own constituency case, I had ill residents taken out of India on a Lufthansa flight. I am very grateful to Shannon and Oliver in your Indian team for helping, but it was a German flight and without that my constituents would have been at significant risk, for reasons I won't go into here. I have two questions. You basically said that it is the politicians who made the choice here, and that politicians said no early repatriations. It is unclear if that was at the FCO or elsewhere in Government, but what was your advice to those politicians about repatriation as opposed to commercial flights?

Sir Simon McDonald: On your first point, Mr Seely, I should stress that countries have been helping each other out. So yes, the focus of British repatriations has been British nationals, but on nearly every flight we have carried citizens of other countries, and they have helped us likewise. This has been a properly joined-up international effort and there were many German citizens on flights from other places. It is quite a patchwork.

On the decision-making process, as you know, officials advise and Ministers decide. They too—we all—have been going through a learning process, dealing with something that has never happened to us before. The detail of the advice is something that is between us and Ministers, but I have no problem with the decision that we should focus on commercial means first. The number of people involved was over 1 million. The commercial route was a proper choice. Going commercial relieved a pressure on the British taxpayer. It has taken longer than was ideal, and longer than in some other countries, but within weeks we are getting all our citizens home—all our citizens who want to come home.

Q62 Bob Seely: Sir Simon, I don't doubt what you have just said about commercial being the overwhelming choice for the majority, but that is not quite the issue. I suppose that leads me on to the second question. Would it not have been possible for emergency repatriation flights for very vulnerable people, or for people in emergency circumstances, to work in parallel to the separate commercial flight, because that seems to have happened with other European states and other states around the world? They were sending emergency flights for some of their folks, while others were using the commercial system, and we seemed to rely on the commercial system until people really began to suffer—small numbers, but very visible and clearly in some emergency situations people were suffering—and only then did we kick in with the repatriation flights. Could we not have done things in parallel?

Sir Simon McDonald: Of course that is possible, but the choice was to focus on commercial first. As I have explained, I think that is a logical and defensible choice. We were focusing throughout on the most vulnerable and getting the most vulnerable home by other means, helping them on to other flights, and helping them early on to commercial flights. The most vulnerable are the focus right now with the charter flights, because the first seats will go to the most vulnerable British citizens. We have just had a flight yesterday from Kolkata, and from Delhi. The deputy high commissioner in Kolkata was looking first to repatriate vulnerable citizens.



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So we have had this blended approach from the beginning, but it is true that we have only switched to significant numbers of charter flights in the last 10 days or so, and that is after other countries. That is the choice that we made.

- Q63 **Andrew Rosindell:** The question I would like to ask is quite specific, regarding assistance for citizens of the overseas territories. Have they been included fully in your considerations, not only about getting people back from abroad to their territory but about other assistance as well? I know it is not necessarily your remit, because it is not under the Foreign Office, but generally is the Government response to helping those people as good as, and equal to, what we would expect for people here in the United Kingdom?

Sir Simon McDonald: The overseas territories citizens, as you know better than anyone else on this call, are an integral part of the UK family. The Foreign Office is deeply involved with the overseas territories and we are helping them, both with their health and with the financial implications of the crisis. I know that Baroness Sugg—as you know, she is the Minister responsible—is writing to the Committee this week with further detail. But, yes, the overseas territories have been part of our planning from the start.

On your specific point, I can't give you details of the number of overseas territories citizens we have helped to move back to the territories. The focus in everything I have seen has been on the health care sector response and the consequences for their economies.

- Q64 **Andrew Rosindell:** Are you in regular communication with the Governments of the different territories to find out if they are in any particular need of assistance? Do you have regular calls to the Premiers and Chief Ministers of the territories? Is the communication you are having with them made public?

Sir Simon McDonald: Yes is the answer. Baroness Sugg takes the lead as the joint Minister in both the FCO and DFID. We have an overseas territories directorate in the Foreign Office deeply involved. Yes, contact is constant.

Anticipating where your questioning is going, this is a particular challenge for the overseas territories. Many of them have economies that are dependent on tourism and the tourism sector has taken a particular hit, so we are in very close contact about what this will mean for them in the medium and long term.

- Q65 **Andrew Rosindell:** I have one question about Gibraltar. They are in a unique situation, having been part of the European Union and having left with us. They have particular issues at the moment with business and with the loss of income that they have suffered, as we all have. Are we going to replicate any support that they may have had from the European Union during this time? Are some of the schemes that are accessible to people in the UK being extended to Gibraltar?



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Sir Simon McDonald: That is a detail that I do not have readily to hand, but I will make sure that the answer features in Baroness Sugg's letter this week. As you know, through the process of negotiating our exit from the European Union, we were conscious of the particular consequences for the OTs, with particular reference to Gibraltar. The Government has consistently signalled that it would fill the gap left by the disappearance of EU funding, at least for an initial period.

Chair: We are approaching the end of this section. I will ask for three last interventions, from Stewart, Royston and Henry.

Q66 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Sir Simon, for joining us today. It has obviously been tough, and I give thanks to all your staff and teams across the world, but, like other Members, we have found that a lot of our constituents have been in wanting positions.

Can I ask first about the commercial route back home? What I noticed, and I am sure others noticed, was that airlines such as Emirates and Qantas immediately started charging exorbitant amounts for seats. I had one case of a family in Pakistan; it was going to cost them the best part of £7,000 to get back. Did anybody at the Foreign Office—either the Secretary of State, a Minister or perhaps yourself—pick up the phone to the airlines and tell them to get a grip of their pricing?

Sir Simon McDonald: Yes, that was a feature of our work in the last weeks. Heads of mission were also involved in the discussion with airlines about routes and about pricing. In many of those conversations, the airlines made the point that they are commercial operations and the market guides them, but that was indeed a part of our conversation.

On your first point, Mr McDonald, there have been complaints and I see that more than 1,000 people have responded to the Committee's informal call for evidence. We get a broader picture, which includes satisfied customers. I absolutely accept that there are people—an unacceptably large number of people—who are unhappy with their service, but we have had many bouquets. The ratio is about 20:1—20 people saying thank you to one person complaining. I just ask you to bear that in mind.

Q67 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I understand that you are a big organisation—I completely appreciate that—but one of my constituents, who will not be sending a bouquet of flowers, was stuck in Australia. His flight was cancelled. He had less than £200. He could not get back to Glasgow. The day after the Foreign Secretary stood in Parliament and made it clear that emergency loans could be an option in certain cases, when I advanced that with one of your officials who deals with Members of Parliament and their offices, I was told that under no circumstances would that be considered, and my constituent should try crowdfunding. Was that an appropriate response?

Sir Simon McDonald: Clearly, I do not know the details of your constituent's case, but loans and emergency loans are part of what we are offering, and they are taken up, for people in exactly the situation that you



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are talking about who do not have the funds readily available to get themselves home. We can and do. We publicised that so that people can get a loan. They can sign an undertaking to repay and they can get a flight.

Q68 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: How many loans have been applied for and given out over the past month?

Sir Simon McDonald: The figures are still low is the honest answer. I know that Menna Rawlings and Andrew Sanderson are on the call. One of them may be able to flick through the pack and give you the precise number. But this is relatively early on in the offer, so we would expect take-up to pick up in the days and weeks ahead. So far, it is a small number.

Q69 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Lastly, and very briefly, can I ask exactly what the policy is or was on the FCO assisting dual nationals back to the United Kingdom? In the case that I mentioned earlier of the family in Pakistan, the oldest member of that family, a woman in her 80s, was a dual national of the United Kingdom and Pakistan. It was intimated to my office that she would not be eligible for any assistance in returning. As it happens, they got back themselves anyway, but what is the policy on dual nationals when a crisis like this hits?

Sir Simon McDonald: The key criterion is the place of residence. If you are a dual British-Pakistani national who happens to be travelling to Pakistan but wants help getting back to the UK, and the UK is your habitual residence, you are eligible for help.

Menna Rawlings: To give the figure that Simon referenced on emergency loans, in a usual year we normally process around 250 emergency loans. So far this year, we have already processed three times that amount, so that gives you some idea of the scale of the response.

One more thing if I may. One other statistic that I wanted to give is about the number of travellers that we have helped to get back to their homeland versus the number of British nationals who have been helped by others, to make the point, as the PUS said, that we are helping each other and that countries are working together on this. So far, 1,828 British nationals have been brought back by other countries and the UK has helped 1,895 nationals to get back to their countries. So, actually, we are in a slight surplus at the moment in terms of the balance of help given versus help received.

Q70 Chair: Can I ask briefly a question that Simon, the PUS, brought up? He said that there were 1.5 million UK citizens overseas, or he thought there were something like that. How does that compare with, for example, France or the United States?

Menna Rawlings: Are you asking me, Mr Chairman?

Chair: You or the PUS. Does anybody have a comparator? Is that a lot of citizens overseas, or is that a usual amount for a large European country of 65 million to 70 million people, like us?



Sir Simon McDonald: I will jump in. I do not know for sure, but we believe that Brits have a propensity to travel that is more accentuated than other European countries, so that is high compared with Germany and France, but I cannot give you an exact figure.

Q71 **Royston Smith:** If I may, Sir Simon, I will take you back to your reply about Peru and commercial versus repatriation. At the meeting we had with the Foreign Secretary about four weeks ago—it feels like a long time ago—I think he said that one of the problems to bringing people home from Peru was not the flights, but that Peru was closing its borders and would not allow anything in or out. That sounds slightly different from the argument about whether or not you use taxpayers' money for repatriation as opposed to expecting people to get themselves back commercially. Can you clarify whether it was a decision of Ministers not to bring back people from Peru, or whether it was that the borders were closed by the Peruvians, and therefore they could not come back?

Sir Simon McDonald: What I would say, Mr Smith, is you identify a very important aspect of the crisis that has not come up so far: multiple countries have imposed internal travel restrictions. That has absolutely complicated the task of getting our people home, because they were not allowed to travel to airports, so our embassies and high commissions have had to negotiate with the local authorities to be able to allow our citizens to travel within countries on lockdown to get to assembly points and to get to airports. So, yes, that has been a significant complicator in not just Peru but India and southern Africa, where we have to get the locals to agree to any kind of internal movement. It is a separate important factor, but I do not think that the difficulty of moving around meant that we delayed charters. It was important, but it was not important in the decision to choose commercial over charters.

Q72 **Henry Smith:** Sir Simon, from my email inbox, and no doubt those of other Members of Parliament, we have a pretty good idea of the answer to the following question. In what parts of the world—which countries around the globe—did we most experience, or are we still most experiencing, difficulties in getting UK passport holders repatriated?

Sir Simon McDonald: In the early days, as the Committee knows, there were particular problems in certain Latin American countries. Looking ahead, the countries where I think we are going to have most work in the next period are in the subcontinent, because there are very large numbers involved and covid has not really hit—they are behind the curve in that way. I think the countries of the subcontinent will be a particular focal point in the next days and weeks.

Q73 **Henry Smith:** Specifically on the subcontinent, following on from Royston Smith's question about internal travel, how many UK nationals are still some way from major departure points? What assistance is being provided to them to enable them to get to major cities, where they have a chance of getting on a flight back to the UK?

Sir Simon McDonald: I have two points by way of reply. Earlier, I mentioned the flight from Kolkata via Delhi back to the UK. Setting up that



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flight, our high commissioner in Kolkata travelled to nine different states in India, using 76 vehicles and 88 drivers, in order to collect over 250 Brits to put them on the flight to get them back to the UK; many of those were vulnerable Brits. That gives a sense of the scale. Overall, we think that the number of Brits wanting to come home who are not yet home is in the tens of thousands, but that is a global figure rather than one specifically for the subcontinent.

Q74 Henry Smith: I have one further supplementary question, if I may. Are there examples of countries around the world who have closed their airspace even to dedicated charter flights coming in to attempt to repatriate British nationals?

Sir Simon McDonald: I am not aware of any country that has closed its airspace entirely. One thing that we monitor closely is whether states would accept a medevac because, of course, we have our people around the world, and we are still confident that we could get medevacs anywhere around the world where needed. Airspace still functions.

Q75 Chair: Let us move on to the next section, where we wanted to talk a little bit about the integrated review. I understand that it has clearly been delayed, but many of the questions we would be asking you are questions that this situation raises. As you are the professional head of the diplomatic service and principal diplomatic adviser to Her Majesty's Government, we are very interested in your thoughts on what issues are changing around the world. Just as a brief introduction, I do not know if you read Lord Hague's article in *The Daily Telegraph* this morning, but it certainly set out some areas of thought. First of all, upon its resumption, what will the Foreign Office contribute to this integrated review, and how will the Foreign Office implement its thoughts into what is said to be a foreign policy-led review?

Sir Simon McDonald: This is of course critical to the future of the Foreign Office. As you know, Mr Chairman, it has been paused, but work continues. I chaired a meeting of our executive committee this morning, and we were looking at our strategic posture. There are multiple elements. One is the money, and the comprehensive spending round is part of that. The second element is the alignment agenda. As the Committee knows, in February the Prime Minister appointed seven joint Ministers for the Foreign Office and DFID, so every junior Minister we have is also in DFID. We are working through the consequences of closer alignment, and where that takes us is on our mind, and I am sure it will be on the Committee's mind.

The third thing is coronavirus. Coronavirus feels to me like one of those watershed moments for the whole world—a chance for the whole world to reset. It feels to me as though one agenda that will be more prominent on the other side is an agenda in which the UK is already very active: climate and the planet. As you know, COP26 has been postponed from November this year to some time during 2021. As we gear up for the rearranged summit, I feel that it could be more ambitious because of what is happening right now, and the United Kingdom is well placed to shape that.



Q76 Chair: One obvious area in which questions are being raised is the relationship with China, the integrity of the data coming out of China and, indeed, the independence of international organisations' criticism. As you know, criticism has been levelled against the World Health Organisation, for example. Can you tell me a little bit about how you see the changes in the relationship with China and what areas you think we will have to look at, in terms of our relationship with China?

Sir Simon McDonald: China is clearly one of our most important relationships already. Equally clearly, it has become more important in the last few years. Taking a cue from Lord Hague, I think there are two things we all need to bear in mind. First, no problem that the world faces today can be addressed—still less solved—without the active participation of China. China is critical across the full policy waterfront.

Secondly, however, we do not wish to become strategically dependent on China. We make no secret of that in our dealings. They are a partner and we are close to them, but we do not wish to be dependent on them. Those will be the two key principles as we plot our policy.

Chair: Alicia, you wanted to come in.

Q77 Alicia Kearns: Specifically on the relationship with China. I would be really interested in a detailed understanding of our relationship with China, including our relations with them since January and throughout the covid-19 crisis—specifically, whether we have made any representations to China about the lack of transparency during the pandemic, either at official or ministerial level.

Sir Simon McDonald: We have been in very close touch with the Chinese authorities in the last two months. Our ambassador in Beijing, Dame Barbara Woodward, has led that engagement, and it has already had multiple strands. One was about the virus, and the second was about a consular response and getting our people out of Wuhan and Hubei province.

Latterly, there has been more and more work on PPE and ventilators, because China is one of the biggest sources of such critical equipment in the world. The embassy in Beijing has procured more than 4,200 ventilators. China has donated 118, and over 750 have been shipped to the United Kingdom. You can see that China is central to all aspects of this crisis.

Q78 Alicia Kearns: Specifically on the point about whether we have made representations about transparency, we saw only two years ago the exact same sort of issue with African swine fever: massive under-reporting and not sharing any data with international bodies, allies or non-allies, which resulted in a massive impact on the world's pork supplies. We have seen the same issues here with transparency, so have we raised directly with China our concerns about the lack of transparency with partners and the international community?



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Sir Simon McDonald: I would phrase it slightly differently, but I would say the Foreign Secretary, in his contacts with his Chinese opposite number, has stressed the importance of transparency and the need to share accurate data quickly. But he has put it that way round.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you.

Q79 **Chair:** Can I just ask about the medical diplomacy aspect that you highlighted, Sir Simon? You said that China has been a major provider of medical equipment, which is clearly true. Have you also seen evidence of China buying up local stocks in order to increase dependence on Chinese supply?

Sir Simon McDonald: I personally have not seen that, but I will take it away and follow up.

Chair: Thank you. Bob, you wanted to come in.

Q80 **Bob Seely:** Sir Simon, you said that every Minister you have is also in DFID. Cross-Government is key, and that is absolutely to be welcomed, but are you sharing ministerial appointments with other Ministries that deal with overseas issues, such as Defence or International Trade, or is it just DFID?

Sir Simon McDonald: In the international space, it is just DFID—all seven. One of the seven, Lord Goldsmith, is also thirdly a Minister in DEFRA, so the other bit of jointery is between us and food and agriculture.

Q81 **Bob Seely:** Is there a danger that you are getting very weighted towards aid at the expense of International Trade and Defence, as you don't share any ministerial roles with Defence or International Trade but you do with DFID? You mentioned that Lord Goldsmith is an exception.

Sir Simon McDonald: This is a matter for debate. I think that we are managing the relationships with the Ministry of Defence and International Trade absolutely as you would want but, because we have joint Ministers with International Development, the relationship is especially close. I would characterise it that way around, rather than saying that it means we have a lesser relationship with other international Departments.

Q82 **Bob Seely:** Okay, but the danger is that you just become a glorified aid agency. Given that the review is going to be primarily on Defence and Foreign, is it not an idea to share a ministerial role with someone in Defence?

Sir Simon McDonald: That is a suggestion that I am sure could be examined in the integrated review, but, Mr Seely, I would dispute that there is a danger that we might become a glorified aid Ministry. You will know that before 1997 the Overseas Development Administration reported to the Foreign Secretary. It was one of the instruments of overseas policy; it did not dominate. I see it as exactly like that, as one key instrument. Clearly, it has grown in the last 23 years, but the fact that we are doing it together does not mean to say that it predominates.



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Q83 Bob Seely: Thank you very much. May I ask a couple more questions? I am sure that the Chair will indicate if he thinks I am asking too much.

You talk about the importance of climate change. I am not 100% sure about the connection with covid, but do you think that there may be other significant issues? For example, why do we and the US pay for the WHO, but the Chinese seem to have much more influence in it than we do?

Sir Simon McDonald: The connection is not clearly directly through climate; the connection is how we run an economy in a post-covid world. This is one of the fora for that discussion.

On the relationship with the WHO, we think that it is a key agency and we continue to support the World Health Organisation. Clearly, the United States right now is in a different place but, as we have a more detailed conversation with the United States, it is clear that they think that it is overloaded and that there needs to be a separate place for consideration of pandemics. A parallel is drawn with what happened in the '60s, when the World Food Programme broke out of the Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Clearly, the international architecture is under discussion. Just as clearly, that needs to be international—it cannot be renationalised—and I would say that the WHO, or the development of it, will be a central part of that.

Q84 Bob Seely: Finally, Kevin Rudd, the former Australian Prime Minister, said this morning that an example of a reform would be the WHO having the power to sanction countries that mislead on or hide pandemics—that are not honest with the international community but allow pandemics to spread. Are you attracted to ideas like that, and do you think that those are the sorts of things that we should be discussing?

Sir Simon McDonald: I think we need to be open at this stage to all these ideas. This is something unprecedented and extraordinary, and it requires new thinking. I am not endorsing what Mr Rudd said but, absolutely, we need to look at that and similarly radical ideas.

Bob Seely: Thank you.

Q85 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Sir Simon, I want to ask just one China-related question, since that is what we are discussing, before I go to CSSF spending. Will you advise the Secretary of State to have the Government change their position on Huawei?

Sir Simon McDonald: As you know, Mr McDonald, the Government decided to proceed with an investment but with very strict conditions. The conditionality is a key part of the decision—excluded from the core and limited with a 35% cap in the non-core. As far as I know that is a firm decision, which is not being reopened.

Q86 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Surely things have changed since that decision was made and announced in the Commons by the Foreign Secretary.



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Sir Simon McDonald: A lot of things are going on, absolutely, and China is a part of it but, as I have already said, China is a very important partner of the United Kingdom. I think that it is compatible to proceed with the Huawei decision and to have the strategically independent relationship that I have been talking about.

Q87 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Okay. I suspect that we will come back to that in future evidence sessions. I am sure.

May I ask about the conflict, stability and security fund, Sir Simon? With regard to the integrated review, can we expect that there will be a bit more transparency than currently exists on where that money is spent and what it is spent on? At the minute, transparency is lacking, as previous Foreign Affairs Select Committees and the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy have identified, so can we expect to see some more transparency on where that money goes?

Sir Simon McDonald: I give notice to Mr Sanderson that I would like him to supplement what I am about to say, but I believe that all the funds—the CSSF and the prosperity fund—are run in a transparent way. There is no expenditure that is concealed from Parliament. That is an essential way for these funds to operate in order to maintain the confidence of Parliament, but could I ask Andrew to supplement a bit?

Andrew Sanderson: Thank you, yes. There has been considerable progress in improving transparency of the spending on the CSSF and other FCO programmes.

One specific issue with the CSSF that does not apply to other ODA programmes so much is that it blends ODA and non-ODA funding, and it does some activities where there are sensitivities about what gets reported in the public domain—for instance, around serious organised crime or security-related projects. So there are some specifics relating to the CSSF that may, in some cases, limit the detail that is put in the public domain. However, generally, there is full transparency.

Q88 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** So when Reprieve say that there is around £34 million in funding that is not public, is that a figure that you do not recognise?

Andrew Sanderson: I would have to check on that particular figure. That is not a figure that I immediately recognise, but it may be because of the blend of the ODA and non-ODA that is part of the CSSF, which is distinct from other programming.

Q89 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Sure. In 2018, the then Foreign Affairs Select Committee asked the FCO to review the current situation in Bahrain, and in particular the funding support that it gives to Bahrain—for example, through the College of Policing. Did that ever happen? Was a review ever undertaken by the FCO on the CSSF funding in Bahrain?

Andrew Sanderson: I am afraid I would have to check the answer. I do not know the details of that particular programme.



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Sir Simon McDonald: Mr McDonald, it is unfair of me to leave Mr Sanderson with the detailed follow-up. I will investigate your question. I do not have an answer readily to hand.

- Q90 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Because I do not think it has happened. I cannot see any evidence of a review that has happened by the FCO, so if that certainly has not happened it would just be good to know why that is, given the serious human rights concerns in Bahrain.

Sir Simon McDonald: My undertaking, Mr McDonald, is to investigate, follow up and write.

- Q91 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Much appreciated, Sir Simon. Finally, on this issue more broadly rather than specifically about Bahrain, how much discretion do embassies and missions have in spending this money? Do the ambassadors themselves have any discretion in distributing this money in the countries that they are in?

Sir Simon McDonald: There are different pots of money. The CSSF is a centrally controlled, cross-departmental fund, but in addition we also have something called the international programme, and within that there are relatively small amounts of money that are at the discretion of heads of mission. The one thing they all have in common, Mr McDonald, is that they are small.

- Q92 **Chris Bryant:** Do you think China has told the world the truth about coronavirus?

Sir Simon McDonald: I think the full story is still emerging, Mr Bryant.

- Q93 **Chris Bryant:** You clearly speak mandarin.

Sir Simon McDonald: Of the local variety.

- Q94 **Chris Bryant:** Yes, with a small m.

All right, let me put it in a different way. I am conscious that our national security in this moment has depended on being able to source things around the world: masks, gowns, gloves et cetera—ventilators, for that matter. At times, barriers have suddenly been thrown up. For instance, I am aware of several thousand bottles of hand sanitiser that are stuck in Turkey, with Turkey refusing to allow them to come to the UK. How much of a role does the Foreign Office play in trying to make sure that at a moment like this, everybody is not going for dismantling free trade?

Sir Simon McDonald: That is a big part of our function, Mr Bryant. Embassies and high commissions are involved in lobbying to keep trade routes open. They are involved in getting permissions for goods to be shipped, but as you recognise, other Governments are making political choices in who they release their kit to. I think that is part of China's decision making, for example, right now.

- Q95 **Chris Bryant:** But if we are talking about national security into the future—pandemics come along every 30 years or so and there are serious ones every 100 years or so—what is the Foreign Office advice into that



debate about how secure we can be in being able to get kit in, in a moment when other countries might be hit?

Sir Simon McDonald: I think that is one of the big debates that is already starting. In a globalised world, the UK is dependent on an international network for strategically vital kit. When this is finished, the United Kingdom and other countries will have another look at the acceptability of that disaggregated dependence. Some things we may decide we need to have in our own supply chain.

Q96 **Chris Bryant:** For instance, one of the big issues in the UK now is on testing. This is not a party political point, because it is just as difficult in Wales, which is Labour led, as it is in England, and no doubt in Scotland as well.

Matt Hancock's answer to the question of why we have not been able to rapidly ramp up the amount of testing is that we do not have a history of having lots of laboratories in the UK. First of all, is there anything that the Foreign Office can do to enable much faster access to international facilities? Secondly, is it part of your advice that, for the future, we are actually going to have to do a lot more home-grown laboratory work?

Sir Simon McDonald: I would say that already the United Kingdom has certain advantages from world leaders in this sector—if not specifically in testing, certainly in pharma and in vaccines. We will be a player after this in that space.

Maybe one thing is expanding the area where we are particularly expert. Right now, we have the world's biggest maker of vaccines; maybe we need to have more capacity in other parts of pharmaceuticals. But I do not think the Foreign Office is going to be the key decider. You asked whether we are lobbying other countries—yes, we are lobbying other countries. This is a wider debate, which will involve the whole country and economy.

Q97 **Chris Bryant:** A final question from me. Why, oh why, oh why, were we not involved in EU procurement?

Sir Simon McDonald: We left the European Union on 31 January.

Q98 **Chris Bryant:** No, we had every right to take part. We were invited to take part. Apparently, we missed the emails, or forgot the emails or did not ask for emails. Five of the meetings we did not attend, but lots of the other meetings we did attend. It is not about leaving the European Union.

Sir Simon McDonald: All I can say is that as a matter of fact we have not taken part.

Q99 **Chair:** Maybe I could ask, Sir Simon: what was your policy advice on it, or was it a political decision?



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Sir Simon McDonald: It was a political decision. The mission—UKMis, rather than UKRep, Brussels—briefed Ministers about what was available, what was on offer, and the decision is known.²

Chris Bryant: I don't think I could ask another question after that.

Q100 **Chair:** Okay, before we come on to a few more issues, may I ask a couple of tidy-up points? First, you spoke to Mr Bryant about various elements to do with testing and all the rest of it, which may not be part of your remit, but clearly diplomacy in making sure that the UK has access to as many products as are needed is part of the diplomatic role of ambassadors and high commissioners.

Could you tell me what sort of leverage you are using to make sure that the areas that make, for example, vast amounts of our generic drugs—countries such as India—are fully appraised of the number of British Indians who will also be dependent on that relationship when those areas are deciding whether or not to sell to us, or, for example, other European countries?

Sir Simon McDonald: You are right: this lobbying is a key part of what the FCO and its network is involved in. We are working very closely with the Department for International Trade.

You are also right that in the lobbying calls most recently between the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Minister of India, Jaishankar, the whole relationship is discussed with the precise intent that our partners should know of the full extent of the relationship as they take these decisions.

Q101 **Chair:** So the emphasis, for example, on the difference between 65,000 people of Indian origin in France and 1.5 million or so in the United Kingdom was made clear.

Sir Simon McDonald: This is a fact that is useful to our high commission in New Delhi.

Chair: It demonstrates the importance of that relationship both ways.

Sir Simon McDonald: Yes.

Q102 **Chair:** May I ask another very quick tidy-up point? Foreign stakeholders are going to contribute to the integrated review. Clearly, I realise that, again, this is on pause, but who are you thinking of?

Sir Simon McDonald: It is on pause. I expect it to be close allies—in particular, the United States. I note that in the past France and Germany have been involved; I would expect that to be the case again, but I do not have a definitive list. When there is one, I am happy to write.

Chair: Thank you.

² The witness wrote to the Committee later on 21 April to correct this response. His letter was published that evening and is available via the Committee's correspondence page [here](#)



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Q103 Graham Stringer: Sir Simon, how has the focus of the Department's work changed in Brussels and in the EU since we left the European Union?

Sir Simon McDonald: There are two things, Mr Stringer, to draw your attention to. First, on 31 January, DExEU dissolved as a Department and the Foreign Office received a large proportion of staff who had previously worked in DExEU. We received more staff than we had originally loaned, or seconded, to DExEU—a total of 107—so we have grown our European capability within the Foreign Office.

The second thing to note is that covid has taken its toll on our EU work. A lot of the people who we transferred into the covid response have come from our Europe directorate. You will note that Monsieur Barnier was sick for several weeks, so the Europe work went somewhat on to the backburner.

A third point to make is that that has now changed. The Europe work is again ramping up, and two more weeks of intense negotiation are scheduled in May. I think that the pendulum is swinging again.

Q104 Graham Stringer: You answered my second question, which was about the transfer of staff. In response to the first question, I was really looking for any changes in policy objectives. Obviously the negotiations are during the transition period, but has there been any other policy change? And just in case you try to answer my third question with my second question, have any of the previous Foreign Office DExEU staff been transferred to our embassies within the European Union?

Sir Simon McDonald: The Europe policy is very focused on the future relationship with the European Union after 31 December, which is still when the transition period is scheduled to finish. There are many threads to this, but the single biggest one is the future trade relationship, and so that has been the focus of much of our Europe directorate's work.

On the transfer of staff to the network, most of that, Mr Stringer, has happened over the last three to four years. We have reinforced our Europe network through the negotiations leading to exit. We had anticipated that we would need more people in European capitals once we were outside the European Union, so that has been done.

Q105 Graham Stringer: And what is the position in comparison with UKRep? Are there more officials in the UK Mission to the EU than there were in UKRep?

Sir Simon McDonald: Yes, in a word. UKRep was a big mission; UKMis is even bigger. But again, since the vote to leave, UKRep—now UKMis—has been gradually getting larger. It is the biggest mission that we have, with more frontline diplomats than any other post in Europe. In comparison with UKMis Brussels, most of our European network is small.

Q106 Graham Stringer: Could you put figures on that for us, and if you don't have them at your fingertips, could you send them to the Committee?

Sir Simon McDonald: Of course we shall do that, but by way of comparison, in June 2016, when we voted to leave the European Union, most of our posts in European Union capitals had four or fewer British diplomats working in them, so they were small missions. All of them have grown in the last four years. As I say, UKMis is still the largest. But we will get you a detailed breakdown of what all the posts across Europe look like today.

Q107 **Graham Stringer:** Finally on the UK Mission to the EU, I suppose this is giving you an open goal, but is it more difficult for officials, who don't have the same rights to wander about Parliament buildings and through the Commission that they had when we were a member, and how do you deal with that, if it is a problem?

Sir Simon McDonald: UKRep always looked a bit different from a classic British post overseas. There were always more people from other Whitehall Departments. It basically looked like Whitehall in Brussels, because there were so many people from DEFRA, the devolved Administrations, the Treasury and the Revenue. So it was atypical, in that there were so many people from other parts of Whitehall. There are people from other parts of Whitehall in the rest of the network, but it was particularly pronounced in Brussels.

As for the difficulty of getting as good information, we have been getting used to that since July 2016. There were already many meetings from which we were excluded. This allows me to pay tribute to colleagues in UKMis Brussels, because their networks and information have been second to none. Even though not in the room, we continue to get a superb service and to have a very good handle on what is happening in our absence.

Graham Stringer: Thank you.

Q108 **Chair:** Can I come on to a rather interesting interview that was given in the *Financial Times* just a few days ago by President Macron? I am sure you have read it, and I am sure you have seen his words. How do you interpret his comments on European solidarity? What advice are you preparing for Ministers on European co-operation on the basis of what was said by one of the most important European leaders?

Sir Simon McDonald: Yes, it was an extremely striking intervention, Mr Chairman. I will comment personally and will give my reaction as I read it on lockdown. It seemed to me deliberately eye-catching. It seems to me deliberately targeted at Germany and other northern countries. Having been ambassador in Berlin, I can imagine the reaction in Berlin and other northern countries. There will clearly be a hot debate in Europe on the back of this crisis, but the President of France always knows what he is doing, even if it puzzles people such as me.

Q109 **Chair:** How do you see European co-operation responding, given the national pressures that we have seen and the rise in anti-EU sentiment? I would not say there is an anti-EU majority, but there is a rise in anti-EU sentiment in Italy, for example, yet there is no apparent movement as yet in Berlin. You know the Chancellor better than most; how do you see



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Chancellor Merkel responding to those pressures?

Sir Simon McDonald: The Chancellor of Germany is a completely committed European, but she is an equally committed defender of German interests. I do not think that the idea of euro bonds is any more attractive to Mrs Merkel today than it was two months ago. Again trying to answer your question personally, I expect the European Union to throw a lot of money at this problem. Clearly the south, particularly Italy and Spain, has gone through the worst of this crisis; usually when such things happen, in Brussels there is some sort of package or programme, usually with a very expensive price tag.

Q110 **Chair:** Yet we have seen the Chinese aid—deficient and defective and limited though it is—getting a better reception in Italy than the European aid, which has been of noticeably higher quality, much greater quantity and significantly higher value. How do you explain that in modern Europe?

Sir Simon McDonald: Again, this is a personal reaction. I think that Italy sees that it has suffered more than countries further north and feels that more help could have come earlier from the north. I think it is a human reaction.

Chair: Alicia, I am coming to you.

Q111 **Alicia Kearns:** I have had reports from Foreign Office staff that in response to our leaving the EU we have amped up our staffing of UN missions in an attempt to maintain a perception of investment in multilateral relationships, to the point that some would say that they feel they are overstaffed. What overall direction are you setting, and how are we balancing staff between multilateral and bilateral roles?

Sir Simon McDonald: Did you say that we were ramping up multilateral or bilateral missions? That one word disappeared.

Q112 **Alicia Kearns:** The UN missions, so that they have become overstaffed and people are having to split portfolios, because there is so little work and so many people.

Sir Simon McDonald: Since the vote to leave the European Union, as an organisation we have done two strategic things. One was to ramp up bilateral representation in European Union member states because, while we were a member, more and more had been done through the Brussels institutions, so we felt more and more comfortable dealing with these neighbours through Brussels. That no longer applies; bilateralism in Europe is back.

The second thing we have done is look at the whole of our multilateral footprint. As the Prime Minister has said repeatedly, we have left one multilateral organisation, not the 70-plus of which we are a member, so we are laying more emphasis on certain other multilateral organisations. The United Nations is one of those. The fact that we are a permanent member of the Security Council means that we are particularly influential in the United Nations. It is the premier international organisation, so I



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think it is a logical place to focus, but not only in New York—also in Geneva, because of all the other organisations, such as the World Trade Organisation, which are headquartered in Geneva. Our mission there has grown, and the seniority of the ambassador in Geneva has increased.

It is one of those classic things, Ms Kearns—we are doing a bit more bilateralism and a bit more multilateralism, but we have been given a bit more resource in order to achieve that.

Chair: Ian, you wanted to come in.

Q113 **Ian Murray:** I want to follow up on Alicia's point. A common thread of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the last Parliament was the re-provisioning of Foreign Office staff to focus on our post-Brexit relationship with the European Union. As part of the integrated review, and as part of post-coronavirus crisis thinking—all your missions across the world have been tested—will some of the thinking around the re-provisioning be looked at again, in terms of whether that focus on the European Union post Brexit is where the re-provisioning of staff needs to go?

Sir Simon McDonald: Yes, Mr Murray. What we have done as a strategic choice over the last four years is made sure that our network was properly global. We have returned to some countries that were traditional partners—all of them, or nearly all of them, Commonwealth countries—from which we had withdrawn in the first decade of the 21st century. Now we have the biggest network we have ever had; only China and the United States are in a larger number of countries. That is the first part.

The second part, as you are saying, is where to put the emphasis within that global network. That is something that we review constantly. The integrated review and the post-covid thinking is another chance to look at where we place the emphasis within our global footprint.

Q114 **Ian Murray:** Are you of the view that the initial thinking will be that the previous Parliament's emphasis on refocusing more resource, post Brexit, on the European Union may have to change, given the new world order that is likely to transpire after the coronavirus crisis?

Sir Simon McDonald: As I have already said, the strengthening in many European embassies was from a very low base. We are not talking about huge embassies, even in capitals like Bucharest or Athens. We have also been reinforcing in other parts of the world, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, with the Africa strategy; we have opened four posts so far and reinforced with at least 30 new UK-based slots. But I take your point. This is another inflection point. It is another chance to look at our global laydown.

Q115 **Ian Murray:** What you are suggesting, though, is a re-cutting of the same cake, rather than a larger cake. Is that where your thoughts are? Is that the envelope you are working within?

Sir Simon McDonald: I am a realist, Mr Murray, but I think there is a case and, we will make a case, for a reinforced overseas effort, because I think there is more to do. Post covid, there are many areas of policy—not



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just security and international policy—where the United Kingdom can play a bigger role, but in order to play that role, we will need more resource. All permanent secretaries make that point, but we will try to be as articulate and persuasive as possible in the integrated review, I hope with your help.

Chair: Stewart, you wanted to come in.

Q116 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Sir Simon, I want to ask about the 31 December exit date—the deadline date. It is clearly absurd, and there is growing concern about reaching that date and getting this done properly, not only in the House of Commons but in the devolved Administrations as well. I am vehemently opposed to Brexit, but I accept that it is happening, and it is in my interest and in Scotland's interest that the United Kingdom gets this right. Do you think that it is realistic to continue on the timetable, and that we can do this by Zoom, or will you advise the Foreign Secretary, and the Government as a whole, to look at extending the deadline beyond 31 December?

Sir Simon McDonald: That is clearly an option, and it is clearly being debated in the public press, but the Government's attachment to that deadline is equally clear. I think there are several ways through. One is sticking with the deadline and getting as much as you can before that deadline, and agreeing a satisfactory process to deal with what it was not possible to deal with by 31 December; or we could go for an extension. The Government need to consider that in the next weeks. I note that the Prime Minister is hors de combat right now, but he will come back, and this will be one of the first things he will have to decide.

Chair: Andrew, you wanted to come in.

Q117 **Andrew Rosindell:** You said that the Prime Minister will decide on an extension, but is it not in legislation that there will be no extension to the transition period? Would that not require a change in the law? How can the benefits of delaying the whole thing still further and further be justified?

Sir Simon McDonald: I was setting out the theoretical possibilities, because I think that they are theoretical possibilities. However, as I have already said, the Government have made their view plain. I believe that the Prime Minister will confirm the existing timetable.

Q118 **Andrew Rosindell:** There is one other issue I would like to raise, on the approach of the FCO and the Government in general. We have had some extraordinary advice, support, information and practical assistance from Taiwan. They sent 1 million face masks the week before last, as a gift. They are not allowed to join the WHO. China blocks them and so on. You know the situation.

Isn't it time that we started to treat differently places like Taiwan—I would say it is effectively a country—and to respect the fact that they are making a major contribution? We can learn a great deal from how they have handled this, in fact. They have incredibly low death rates, and they know what they are doing when it comes to dealing with a pandemic.



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Shouldn't we include them, or at least make clear to China that it is unacceptable to bar them from being members of the WHO at this time?

Sir Simon McDonald: As you know, Mr Rosindell, Taiwan is one of the most critical strategic issues for Beijing. As you also know, WHO rules do not preclude Taiwanese participation, and we, the United Kingdom, think that Taiwan should participate—for the reasons you set out—in the deliberations of the WHO, which the rules permit.

Q119 **Andrew Rosindell:** Can we be more robust in supporting them?

Sir Simon McDonald: We do support that participation, yes.

Q120 **Chair:** Can you please tell us what communications Taipei had with us in the early days of this crisis—what reports they gave us, independent perhaps of the WHO, and what information they shared about their own successes in fighting this virus?

Sir Simon McDonald: As the Committee knows, we have a post in Taipei—an active post. I do not have its reports to hand, but I am confident that it actively reported what was happening, and it is part of our learning from other parts of the world that appear to have dealt most effectively with the covid-19 crisis.

Chair: Okay. Chris, you wanted to come in on a separate issue.

Q121 **Chris Bryant:** Yes. Sorry; I had a little bit of an IT issue there—battery running out.

It is a very simple one about Brits in Spain, or for that matter France—two countries that have been significantly hit by coronavirus. Do we have any idea of the number of British people who have died in Spain or France?

Sir Simon McDonald: I do not, but I do know that at the start of the crisis, Mr Bryant, there were more than 200,000 Brits travelling in Spain. It took 10 days to get more than 190,000 of them home, so most Brits travelling in Spain have returned to the United Kingdom.

Q122 **Chris Bryant:** Yes, but there are 750,000 or so Brits living in Spain, and those are the ones I am interested in.

Sir Simon McDonald: We think the figure is a lot less than that. Again, I do not know, but I will take this away. I will be in touch with the embassy in Madrid, and I will write to the Committee about our best understanding of British mortality in—

Q123 **Chris Bryant:** Could you do Spain, France and Italy? It would be considerably useful for us to know, not least because the health systems in those countries operate in a different way. Sometimes, in Spain, you might end up in a private hospital and not be covered by the usual European systems; I have had an instance locally of that.

Sir Simon McDonald: Okay. We will follow up and write.

Chris Bryant: Thank you.

Chair: Alicia, you wanted to come in.



Q124 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you, Chair. Going back to the integrated review, my question is about public consent. The less we have public consent for our foreign security policies, the more secure our enemies are. In the same way, the less we can rely on our allies—in fact, our alliances are our major advantage over hostile states—the stronger those hostile to us are.

It is very difficult to evidence public consent, and erosion in public consent. What efforts is the Foreign Office making to measure UK public consent, and therefore the success of our activities, and conversely the success of hostile Governments in undermining that consent? Has that been taken into account in the integrated review? I say that because one of the big gaps, in my experience, throughout our national security apparatus is that understanding of the importance of public consent and maintaining support at home, and an understanding of what we do abroad in the interests of British people.

Sir Simon McDonald: I agree with you, Ms Kearns. I think traditionally the United Kingdom has had a good appreciation and good support for British involvement around the world. I agree that this has been under pressure in recent times, and I agree that we need to look at how the covid crisis affects that. So, yes, what you are talking about is part of the integrated review; we will look at domestic understanding of and the strength of domestic support for what we are doing.

However, as I have already said, citizens of the United Kingdom travel more than any other citizens as a proportion. The Prime Minister quotes a figure of the biggest expatriate community that any country has; some may dispute it, but it is 7 million to 8 million people. So the familiarity of Brits with what is happening elsewhere in the world is generally higher than it is in other countries. I hope that that plays into British understanding and support for what we do overseas. My promise to you is that this will be part of the integrated review.

Q125 **Alicia Kearns:** Fantastic. I think the key element is less an overall understanding of how we help people; the No.1 job of the Government is to keep its people safe, and the No. 1 job of the Foreign Office is to keep people safe abroad, but some of the primary efforts of hostile nations at the moment are those offensive capabilities in terms of information and undermining public consent, so thank you for confirming that that will be part of the integrated review.

Sir Simon McDonald: I agree.

Q126 **Chair:** Let us move on. We would like to wrap up a few issues that are more about the nature of the Department as an organisation. Before we come to that, can I ask a really precise question? Who determines who has diplomatic immunity in the United Kingdom?

Sir Simon McDonald: That is done between the sending state and the receiving state—the United Kingdom. The sending state will submit names to us, and we agree or do not agree. But once it is agreed, it is fixed.

Q127 **Chair:** So there is a register. In theory, I could look down a register of a couple of hundred or maybe a thousand names of people who enjoy



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diplomatic immunity within the United Kingdom. Would you hold that in the protocol department?

Sir Simon McDonald: It is not only diplomats; it is also their families.

Q128 **Chair:** Sure, but there is a list.

Sir Simon McDonald: There are some 20,000 on the list. The protocol department in the Foreign Office is the best repository for that information.

Q129 **Chair:** So if somebody were to commit an offence in the United Kingdom, it would be very simple to know whether they were on the list.

Sir Simon McDonald: Yes.

Q130 **Chair:** So there is no doubt about whether someone is covered by diplomatic immunity.

Sir Simon McDonald: I would say that there is no doubt but, as we both know, there are controversial cases. In the case of Harry Dunn the controversy was over an agreement made at the end of the last century about continuing immunities for US diplomats posted to the Croughton Annex. In that agreement, the American authorities gave a pre-waiver for accredited diplomats. That was the formal position, but the agreement was silent on the rights of their dependants, which has been the origin of a lot of the dispute. Our legal advice is that when an agreement is silent on something, what pertained before—immunity—still applies.

Q131 **Chair:** Just to be clear, is that for the Foreign Office or the police force to determine?

Sir Simon McDonald: No, the police force does not determine it. The police force asks the Foreign Office about immunity matters. Because this was a very recondite bit of law, it was a conversation between lawyers in Washington and London.³ The legal conclusion was that, although it was apparently illogical, immunity applied to Ms Sacoolas. Because immunity applied, the immunity would have to be raised in order for her to be prosecuted in the United Kingdom.

Q132 **Chair:** Just to be absolutely clear—you will have read reports in the *Mail on Sunday* over the weekend, and I want to give you the opportunity to clarify the situation—there was no determination by the Foreign Office; there was no granting by the Foreign Office. It was merely the Foreign Office recognising an existing fact and making it clear, and there was therefore no change in status. The Foreign Office did not grant an immunity that did not pre-exist.

Sir Simon McDonald: Correct. It was the Foreign Office recognising a fact.

³ The witness wrote to the Committee on 23 April to clarify his answers relating to diplomatic immunity and correct this particular response. His letter was published that evening and is available via the Committee's correspondence page [here](#)



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Q133 **Chair:** And the police force had no say in that. It is for the Foreign Office to grant, and for the police force in question simply to acknowledge what the Foreign Office has determined.

Sir Simon McDonald: The police force will always refer immunity questions to the Foreign Office as a matter of course.

Q134 **Chair:** Thank you. One of the questions that has come up in the past, as you will know, and one of the issues we have been very interested in as a Committee is the pay of members of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, because it is very often lower than other comparable Government Departments, including DFID. As you correctly state, seven of your Ministers—in fact, all the junior Ministers—are now shared with DFID. Presumably that means the overlap between the Departments is increasing.

Sir Simon McDonald: Yes, and one of the tasks we have from the Prime Minister is to align terms and conditions between the two Departments. This is in two big chunks: one is the terms of conditions of UK-based members of staff, and the other is our local colleagues in the network. What you say is widely believed, and there is a lot of evidence, but as we accumulate more information we find that although basic pay in DFID tends to be higher than equivalents in the Foreign Office, the allowance package for the FCO in the field tends to be more generous than DFID, so there is a certain equalising.

Q135 **Chair:** Do you believe that affects recruitment in any way, or indeed retention?

Sir Simon McDonald: Our recruitment is the best it has ever been, I think by any measure. Last year we had more than 23,000 people apply to the Foreign Office fast stream, and the quality of our entrants is superb. I see them and their work every day, so in the short term, no. However, when one gets into one's career, the opportunity cost is ever more on your mind, so later on I think it is more of an issue.

Q136 **Chair:** Am I right in saying that the number of UK full-time equivalents has increased by 10% between 2017-18 and 2018-19? Why was this?

Sir Simon McDonald: We got extra money, specifically for Global Britain, the Europe work and the Africa strategy, so quite a lot of that extra money went into extra staff. Quite a lot of those staff are on fixed-term contracts; if they are to be established as permanent members, then the money needs to be permanent as well, and that is a matter for negotiation in the comprehensive spending review.

Chair: Alicia, you wanted to come in?

Q137 **Alicia Kearns:** It was just a quick question about that balance of DFID versus Foreign Office pay and benefits. There has been a long-standing challenge getting people to want to do postings at King Charles Street, at the Foreign Office headquarters, because of this disparity of benefits versus pay.



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I know that measures have now been put in place where people are required to do a home posting in between different postings, but I would be interested in a bit more detail about how that balances. Having been at post, it was definitely the case that DFID had better accommodation, better benefits, better support and better travel packages—some of which, I would say, I do not believe are in the best interests of the taxpayer in any way, sense or form. The challenge is that when we have people doing home postings, which are deeply important, they do not benefit from those benefits packages, so how do the two align?

Sir Simon McDonald: Could I give notice, Ms Kearns, that I would like Menna Rawlings to come in and supplement what I have to say, because Menna used to be our HR director?

We are unpacking all these issues. The first point I want to make is that the traditional characterisation that DFID gets more than the FCO, full stop, needs to be investigated, because it is a bit more complicated than that, but there are a couple of other points. One is that, as you may be pleased to know, the FCO is responsible for accommodation for everybody on the platform. Whatever your home Department, there is a concordat and you are on the FCO platform, so the FCO has taken over accommodation responsibility for DFID and for other Departments.

The second thing is that what you say about people being more reluctant to serve in London than in the network was the case for a very long time, but in the last few years there has been a distinct shift. A lot of that is down to the fact that nearly all households of diplomats are now double-income households, so the salary coming in from the FCO is in many cases not even the larger salary in the household. Persuading a partner to go overseas and to pause a better-paid career or to take a less well-paid job in order to move with a Foreign Office officer is more of a challenge. Menna's successors as HR director are finding that the conversation is a bit different from what you have just described. I am sure Menna would like to supplement that.

Menna Rawlings: I would add a couple of things. We focus on pay a lot, but people join the Foreign Office because they are very motivated to serve their country and to live and work overseas. That means two things. One is that when it comes to staff engagement and morale, we still score incredibly highly compared with comparators elsewhere in the civil service. Our staff engagement score this year was 72%, which is one of the highest, and it is slightly higher than DFID this year, for example.

It is worth thinking about the full range of benefits and factors that motivate different people. It is quite a complex picture, and it is getting more complicated. We have had to introduce things like commuter postings so that staff have the option perhaps to live with their family in the UK while they go to posts in Europe, for example, and travel back at weekends. That is an innovation that many international companies are doing that we have followed as well.



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My last point is on covid and how difficult it has been for our staff and their families around the world. We have had to draw down a small number, in relative terms, of UK-based staff. About 10% of our overall workforce have come back to the UK, and we have had to bring back 1,063 dependants. I say that to remind the Committee of the personal cost sometimes of a diplomatic career and how that plays out over time. It hopefully balances out, but I want to pay tribute to our staff and families for all that they are doing around the world at the moment to support our international efforts.

Q138 Alicia Kearns: Thank you. I remember the first statement on covid-19 back in January. I raised that exact point and asked what we were doing to support our staff and their families. We all recognise exactly what they go through. The only point I would make is that when you work at the Foreign Office it is because you care deeply and passionately. Indeed, I turned down two promotions to stay where I was working because it mattered deeply. Just because people are passionate about what they are working on and care deeply does not mean we should not reward them. I don't think I know a single member of Foreign Office staff who would not say that, although they care deeply, it hurts them that at the same time they see staff in other Departments paid far better than them, despite the fact that they work they do saves lives.

Menna Rawlings: Absolutely, which is why we have a relentless focus at the board, led by Simon, on staff pay. I absolutely appreciate the point. Thank you.

Chair: You have support from the Committee on that very point. Stewart, do you want to come in?

Q139 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: This question is probably for Sir Simon. It is about departmental policy. What is the policy at the FCO on the support it does or does not give to devolved Governments? In the public press over the last couple of years—if you are to believe what is in the press, which I accept is not always the case—it was not always great. The First Ministers of devolved Governments—my own and that in Cardiff as well—had a different policy on Brexit, for example, compared with the United Kingdom Government. There were all kinds of stories about support being withdrawn whenever Heads of devolved Governments travelled abroad and all the rest of it. Is that all rubbish or done now, because of Brexit and we have left? What is the policy?

Sir Simon McDonald: One point, before I answer your question, Mr McDonald, is to thank Ms Kearns and the Chairman for what they have just said about the Committee's support for helping the Foreign Office get a better pay deal. To answer your question, the Foreign Office and our network represent all parts of the United Kingdom; we work for all Governments of the United Kingdom. I was ambassador in Berlin and there were [*Inaudible*] from the devolved Administrations in the embassy in Wilhelmstraße. So it is part of our mission to represent the whole of the United Kingdom. As you know, foreign and defence policy is a reserved right, so for that part of our work we are focused on the Government in



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Westminster, but we work with and help the devolved Administrations as well.

Q140 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** So all the absurd stories about, you know, they wouldn't get support on travel if the First Minister of Wales was in Paris, or whatever—all of that kind of stuff is nonsense.

Sir Simon McDonald: The duty of civil servants to work for all parts of the United Kingdom is clear.

Q141 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** You are kind of putting my mind at rest, but not quite, because I don't quite know what that means. Are those stories true or false?

Sir Simon McDonald: I am not going to explore the history. I would prefer to focus on the future and what our clear obligation is.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Okay.

Chair: Right, I think we will take that as putting his mind as at rest as we can get it, in the circumstances. Henry, you wanted to ask about ambassadorial appointments.

Q142 **Henry Smith:** Sir Simon, what is your role in the appointment of ambassadors?

Sir Simon McDonald: Mr Smith, I chair the senior appointments board of the Foreign Office and we make recommendations to the Foreign Secretary on senior appointments, including ambassadors, and then they go over to No. 10 for the Prime Minister to agree. Then finally they go to Buckingham Palace, because ambassadors are Her Majesty's ambassadors and so Her Majesty has final sign-off.

Q143 **Henry Smith:** If I could come back with a specific case, what was the result of the open recruitment method used for the ambassador to Luxembourg?

Sir Simon McDonald: As you clearly recall, Mr Smith, we ran open competitions for four senior posts in the last 18 months—for Luxembourg, for Seoul, for Kuwait and for the Governor of Gibraltar. Two of those appointments went to people outside the diplomatic service. The one in Luxembourg went to a civil servant whose home Department is the Ministry of Defence. She beat the competition. Her appointment was recommended and agreed by the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister.

Q144 **Henry Smith:** Finally, do you think that this concept works, and what are our future plans for open recruitment?

Sir Simon McDonald: We think open recruitment is a way to refresh the senior ranks. It is vital for the diplomatic service to look like the country it represents, and recruiting for senior jobs is one way to change things relatively rapidly, but the key is that the successful candidate has to be the best for the job. So that is why, for the appointments to Kuwait and to



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Seoul, the next ambassadors will be existing members of the diplomatic service.

Henry Smith: Thank you.

Q145 **Chair:** Can I just ask one last question on European policy, which I should have asked earlier but—forgive me—overlooked? As you rightly say, you were in Berlin at a very important moment in the transition of European policy—indeed, the negotiation that David Cameron was holding for our renegotiation of our position in the European Union, so you will be aware of the way in which the European Union, and Germany in particular, views transition within European member states. How do you think Germany is going to view the recent parliamentary vote in Hungary, and how do you think the European Union as a whole will react to the change in Government structure in an important member state?

Sir Simon McDonald: Frankly, Mr Chairman, what was happening in other European Union member states, Hungary and Poland, distressed and preoccupied my hosts in Berlin as much as any other aspect of European policy. The democratic destiny of European Union member states is in the strategic interest of Germany. I think that will shape their reaction to what happens in Hungary.

Q146 **Chair:** How do you think Germany will react though? There is really a question here for Germany.

Sir Simon McDonald: I think most of the reaction will be behind the scenes, Mr Chairman. They are respectful of other people's decisions, but within a democratic framework, and the strength of that framework is something that Germany cares a lot about. I expect them to be active in that interest but behind the scenes.

Q147 **Chair:** The European Union was pretty clear with Austria a number of years ago when various members of different political groups got into power and Austria was excluded. Do you think that the democratic changes in Hungary or Poland will see changes in the way that Poland and Hungary are included?

Sir Simon McDonald: It is a possibility, but we are not going to be at the table, so we are not going to shape how the European Union reacts as a whole. It is possible that there will be some sharper reaction, but I do not know when or what it might be.

Q148 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed, Andrew, Menna and Sir Simon, for joining this virtual session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. With that, we will draw to a close.

Sir Simon McDonald: Can I mention one last thing, Mr Chairman? The advantage of a good long session is that I have been alerted to the fact that I misspoke earlier in answer to a question from Mr Smith about international airspace. There is one country that has restricted its airspace and that is DPRK—North Korea. That is an exemption from the open skies.

Chair: Okay, thank you. Your point is noted. I am not sure that is a huge



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surprise, but thank you very much. Thank you particularly to the Parliamentary Digital Service for facilitating this. Thank you very much to everybody.