



## Science and Technology Committee

### Oral evidence: [Pre-appointment hearing with the Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Natural Environment Research Council](#), HC 702

Monday 21 October 2013

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 October 2013.

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Members present: Andrew Miller (Chair), Jim Dowd, Stephen Metcalfe, Pamela Nash, Sarah Newton, Roger Williams

#### Questions 1-41

Witness: **Sir Anthony Cleaver**, Chair-elect of the Natural Environment Research Council, gave evidence.

**Q1 Chair:** Sir Anthony, welcome to the hearing. You are familiar with the purpose of the hearing.

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* Yes, indeed.

**Q2 Chair:** We have a series of relatively straightforward questions that we want to go through. Can I first ask you something which, in a sense, has nothing to do with the formal issues around the hearing? How do you see the Big Bang developing?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* It is going very well. It is pretty well established now in the annual calendar, certainly for the schools that take science, engineering and technology seriously. They know when it is; they start to plan whether they are going to send a class or two or three people who they particularly want to go, and so on. I have to be honest and say that I did not think it would grow to the scale that it has so fast. The first year I got 5,000 children through and last year it was 53,000 or something like that. It has done very well very fast. I am pleased to say that my successor, Paul Golby, is still very keen on supporting it. I think it will do well.

**Q3 Chair:** Thank you. What made you interested in this particular post?

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**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** I should be honest and say that I did not see an advert. I was approached by the search firm, and they said to me that they thought I was ideally suited to this. I said, “You had better convince me,” so they went with me through the various things that I had done over the years involved with the environment, and at the end I thought, “Well, perhaps they are right,” so I put my name forward. Would it help if I went through my interest and involvement?

**Q4 Chair:** We have a pretty good profile of you. Most of it is in the public domain. I want to make a comparison, if I can. How do you see this as being different from your time with the MRC?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** That is an interesting question. I don’t think it is any less important; it is simply different. Some of the challenges here are greater—perhaps communication, for a start. Much of what the MRC does is pretty technical. Obviously, it is a long-term benefit, which is of interest to all of us, but a lot of its interest in the short term is mainly for professionals, whereas the issues that NERC, inevitably, is involved with are issues with which a range of different audiences with different backgrounds, abilities and understandings are very concerned. That is probably one of the differences.

In other areas, I think it will prove to be much the same. I hesitate to say too much about what it will be before I have arrived and have actually had a chance to see in some detail, but, as always, I am sure there will be more good science that one would like to support than one can afford, so there will always be the pressures through the budget on what we support and how we prioritise. That is always going to be the case. I am sure that, again, one of the important aspects is making sure that we are bringing through people who can contribute in the future. That part of it and relationships with the universities in particular are absolutely key. All the research councils are certainly here, as they were at the MRC.

I could go on drawing parallels if you would like me to. One of the issues that we looked at at the MRC and on which we took one or two decisions was the question of how much you do through institutes that you control, so to speak, as opposed to putting out to universities. Again, that is something that I suspect will be current here and will be reviewed from time to time. There will be a lot of parallels, but I would not like to take them for granted. I am not going in on the assumption that I know how to do it. I am going in first to learn, I hope.

**Q5 Chair:** It would be a boring job if you knew everything before you went in.

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** Absolutely.

**Chair:** We would like to go back a little bit further in your career. Pamela?

**Q6 Pamela Nash:** Sir Anthony, I want to ask you about your experience as chair of the Atomic Energy Authority and how you think that that might help your work with NERC.

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**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** I suppose that leads to another question, almost inevitably, which is that I am a classicist, if you look at my formal education; I went straight from there into IBM. I was technical for eight years, in the sense that I became a systems engineer, designed large systems and so on, but I then went into management. So when I was asked to do the Atomic Energy Authority, I was initially concerned as to whether I would find it a challenge. The reality is that in these sorts of areas—it was the same with the Atomic Energy Authority as with IBM, the MRC or NERC—you are going to have people who are right at the leading edge of specific disciplines, and there is no way you could be abreast of them in their specific disciplines. The skill is understanding how to get people to work together, making sure they can communicate properly, and not being afraid to ask the apparently stupid question. It is quite surprising how often that turns something up.

The other issue with the Atomic Energy Authority was this question of communication, and in particular understanding the stakeholders. I came back to that when I was at the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, because there you really had to understand the different audiences and how you put over what may be the same message at three or four different levels. That is something that I am sure is going to apply here.

**Q7 Pamela Nash:** Excellent. Thank you. I want to ask you more specifically about your experience in privatising a public body. Do you think that that was a factor in your selection for this position?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** For this post? I wouldn't have thought so, frankly. I suppose it may have been at the back of somebody's mind, but that was not what I was put into the Atomic Energy Authority to do. I decided after about three months that it was the right thing to do and it then took me two years to persuade the then Secretary of State that it was the right thing to do. It gave me a particular experience, but I don't think all privatisations are the same. I had to try and get that through when the Government had a majority of one, which was a challenge. It is a bit different at the moment—a bit.

**Q8 Stephen Metcalfe:** Obviously, you will have to work very closely with the chief executive in your new role. How do you see that relationship? Do you see it as a partnership, critical friends, perhaps some other description?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** It is really all of the above, isn't it? It is the most critical relationship in any organisation. If it doesn't work, then the organisation suffers. I think I have chaired pretty well every sort of organisation you can think of. It has always been a prime concern to make sure that I really understand how I can help most, because different chief executives have different strengths and relative weaknesses. I think the chairman's job is to make the chief executive's job possible, to try and enhance his capabilities, and occasionally to point out that there may be another way of looking at things, or perhaps it would be better to take a little longer to come to a view and so on. Generally speaking, though, the chairman's role is to get the best out of other people, both the chief executive and the council. I have absolutely no desire to go back to being a chief executive. I did it

for some years and it was fine at the time, but I enjoy being a chairman, largely because of that sort of relationship.

**Q9 Stephen Metcalfe:** I fully agree, but there is one part of your role that is unique to you, which is that you are the custodian of the charter. How do you see that part of your role evolving? Does that make you the conscience of the chief executive—to make sure that they are doing that because it is specific to you?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* I don't know whether "conscience" is the right word, but it certainly means that you need to understand what the formal responsibilities are as laid down in the charter and what your specific role is. You are, I think, the interface between the Secretary of State ultimately and the council. One of the important aspects is to understand where the Government are coming from on specific issues and ensure that the chief executive first and then the council understand what they are looking for. That does not mean that one necessarily always agrees with the first suggestion from Government. That would be an equal abrogation of responsibility, but it does mean that you have to be very conscious of that and that is one of the areas where one should be supporting the chief executive specifically.

**Q10 Stephen Metcalfe:** Do you think that the charter should be published online by NERC?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* You can see the charter if you go online, I think. Whether it is down to NERC to publish it specifically, I don't know. They should make it available if somebody asks for it. I can't see any reason why it would not be available.

**Q11 Stephen Metcalfe:** What about indicators to demonstrate how you are fulfilling your charter obligations?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* One of the biggest challenges is how you measure performance in this sort of context. To be honest, that is not an area that I have got into yet. It is one of the things that I will need to understand.

**Q12 Stephen Metcalfe:** But you see the benefits of that.

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* I believe and I have advocated for many years that if you can't measure it, you can't manage it. That is fundamental.

**Q13 Jim Dowd:** The first line of the person specification states: "An outstanding individual is sought to become Chair of the NERC..." In what way are you outstanding?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* There's a question. I think that I have had the benefit of opportunities that fall to very few people and I like to think that, as a result, I have learned from them and been able to develop the experience that I can now bring to bear for the benefit of NERC. Examples are that I happened to go straight from Oxford into IBM at a

point in time when few people could spell “computer,” let alone had any idea what it did. I was there through a period of fantastic growth: if you look at the UK company, in the year I joined it turned over £7 million, and I handed it over in 1992 at £4.5 billion. That is the sort of growth that teaches you a lot of lessons, not least about managing change. That was fundamental.

Then there were questions such as dealing with people on a relatively large scale. We built a factory in Greenock in Scotland on the so-called “Red Clyde” and chose to put there the responsibility for building systems that changed every two or three years, so the skills of the people needed to be upgraded, changed and so on. We had to take them with us when that was not what they had been used to in shipbuilding prior to that. One learned some lessons from that.

You referred to the Atomic Energy Authority. That was a fascinating experience. It was a privilege in that their technical expertise in those areas was as good as anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, at the time I didn’t think the management expertise matched that. They deserved better, and that is what we tried to do when I was there.

As to my experience with the environment, perhaps one example is that in 1993 I went on the board of a company called Smith & Nephew. It was a first-class company and I was very proud to be involved with it, but when I arrived the chairman and the board did not think that the environment was an issue for them. It took about three years gradually to get an understanding that there were a lot of things that we did that affected the environment in the way that we worked. Interestingly, our employees were very interested in it, because, as usual, when their children came home from school, they said, “Daddy, what are you doing that affects all of this?”

It is not for me to say that I am an outstanding individual. As I say, I did not apply to the advert.

**Q14 Jim Dowd:** But if you are not outstanding you are not going to get the job, are you, because it says so in the person statement? You were at I beg to move—I don’t know if you were the chief executive or not. Were you there when they developed the 1750 telephone switch for the marginal foray into the telecoms business?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* Yes, that is right.

**Q15 Jim Dowd:** And then the 3750.

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* Yes.

**Q16 Jim Dowd:** Then they pulled out again.

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* Yes.

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**Q17 Jim Dowd:** Was that anything that you were directly involved with, or is that something that grew out of the technological development of the company?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* No, it was through the company's technology. I was involved in the sense that I was looking after a number of customers, mainly in the City in those days, and some of them used the 1750 and 3750 to their benefit, but I was not involved with the decisions to go in or to pull out.

**Q18 Jim Dowd:** IBM were gone almost as soon as they arrived in the telecoms market. I say that because I am a telecoms electronics engineer, who for the past few decades has been occupying the post of Member of Parliament and public representative. By the same token, how do you describe yourself? Are you a scientist, an engineer, an administrator, a manager or a businessman? What is your key identity?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* I think I would say I am a serial chairman. *[Laughter.]*

**Q19 Jim Dowd:** Right. So we have to decide whether we are going to break with that series or not.

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* Absolutely.

**Q20 Jim Dowd:** Where and how would you amass scientific/technical evidence? Would you rely on your own instincts or would you rely on others?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* As I have said, one would expect to be dealing with highly competent scientists, many of them dealing in very narrow areas. You are looking, therefore, to determine to whom you want to listen to try to understand what the scientific consensus is in those cases where there is more than one obvious view of something and so on, and to learn who the people are whom you believe you can trust; then at the end of the day you make a judgment.

**Q21 Jim Dowd:** Would you rely upon council members for that or would you have an external focus?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* I would look both to council members, and in some cases it would be obvious that a particular university has a very high reputation in that particular area, or whatever. One would certainly do that. Internally, though, one would expect to have the expertise in each of the major areas and to start by looking at their understanding and views.

**Q22 Jim Dowd:** One of the great problems certainly of public administration, and I am sure it applies to the areas that you are currently engaged in, is when, as an essentially layperson, two so-called experts tell you entirely contradictory things when you move into areas of controversy such as, say, climate change. How would you resolve those differences?

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**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** The job of NERC is to pursue sound science and to rely on the scientific basis. Other people, ultimately, will take policy decisions based on the facts as they understand them. NERC has a responsibility to understand, using all the expertise at its disposal, to communicate that clearly, and to make sure that when it is communicating, it does so at an appropriate level for the audience with which it is concerned. It is not always going to be able to resolve some of these big debates.

**Q23 Jim Dowd:** Finally, in a circumstance where you have argument A and argument B, in total contradiction to each other—you are not Solomon and I do understand that—what would your instinct be: to form a view or simply to say, “I’ve no idea”?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** My instinct, first of all, would be to make sure that one really does understand the differences and that they are genuinely irreconcilable. On that assumption, you have to take a decision as to whether you are going to present both views and say, “These are the two views and this is backing for each of those,” or one might take a decision, but I think it is unlikely that the chairman of the council would be the person taking the decision.

**Q24 Sarah Newton:** Sir Anthony, you have spent a lot of time talking about your past, your experiences and motivation for the role. I would now like to focus on the context in which you would be taking this role. The challenges facing NERC as an organisation could be quite considerable as we are entering into a comprehensive spending review. There are issues around obtaining enough skilled scientists and all sorts of things. What do you see as the main scientific and political challenges that face NERC over the period when you are, hopefully, going to have your hand on the tiller?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** By political challenges, I am not sure from what corner you are coming. A political challenge might be decisions on finance, the impact that they have and the decisions that the council would then have to take as to whether it had to preserve the facilities, for example, or cut the number of scientists that it could support in certain areas. The whole role, in a sense, is one, surely, of balance throughout. There are probably six or seven different balances that you have to preserve. There is the long term versus the short term in terms of the sort of research that one is funding. There is the public versus private sector side, because part of the responsibility of NERC is to look to the exploitation of the science that it generates and so on. That again is an area.

In one sense, the whole climate change debate is a political issue. I can’t see that either being resolved or going away in anything like the sort of period that I am likely to be there. The scientific challenges, again, may revolve around that area, because I imagine that there will always be pressure to try and resolve some of those questions, but in many cases that is not going to be possible in the next four years or however long it may be. I don’t know if that has answered your question.

**Q25 Sarah Newton:** You mentioned that there are about six different balances. You have identified about four so far.

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**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** There is international versus national, for a start. There is a question of partnerships—who you partner with and how you do that. There is the question of using your own resource or relying on the universities. There is the question of working with Government Departments, other than one sponsoring Department, because many of the other Departments—DECC and DEFRA most obviously—have some aspects involved in that. There is a number of specific relationships they have, like Living With Environmental Change. I know not a lot about it but I understand that that is an area where a lot of partnership is going on. These are all aspects where you have to balance. You won't please everybody in doing that. The important thing is that the decisions you take are taken openly and are seen to be based on good evidence. That is all one can ever do.

**Q26 Sarah Newton:** That is quite a complex scenario that you paint. There are many different conflicting issues that have to be balanced.

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** It is.

**Q27 Sarah Newton:** So how would you go about developing a strategy or a series of strategies that would cope with all of those particular challenges that you have, quite rightly, expressed?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** I would, obviously, start with the strategy that they have at the moment. It would be foolish to think that one is going to go in and rewrite the whole scenario, because that must have been developed from experience both with external forces and with their own views on what is important and the relative priorities. That is an obvious starting point. From there I need to understand and feel the pressures, if you like, in post in order to decide where one might wish to trim that strategy.

**Q28 Sarah Newton:** So you would pretty much stick with what you have got for a period of time, and then see what you felt really needed to be adjusted?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** Yes, I think so.

**Q29 Sarah Newton:** Do you think that your recent experience with the MRC would help you in that?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** Yes. I think some of that will be highly applicable. I was there at the time when we had a significant issue with the National Institute for Medical Research in Mill Hill and the question of moving it to King's Cross, which is now, I am delighted to say, well under way. One of the things I learned from that was the strength of feeling that people can generate over a physical location and a history associated with it. I suspect that might be the case in parts of NERC, and those parts may need to be reviewed at some stage. I am not expecting there to be a lack of issues.

**Sarah Newton:** No, and it seems like you have a huge range of experience.

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**Chair:** I did say to Sir Mark Walport at the time, “Why can’t it be in Manchester?” but we are not going to re-run the discussion.

**Q30 Sarah Newton:** For every challenge you face, you can probably call on your vast experience to help you as you go through to the future.

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* I hope so.

**Sarah Newton:** Good luck.

**Q31 Roger Williams:** Good afternoon, Sir Anthony. I am sorry that I was not here at the beginning of the meeting. The person specification for the successful candidate for this post says that they must have good experience at a senior level of interacting with Government. Can you tell us something about your experience and give us some examples?

*Sir Anthony Cleaver:* I suppose there are a number of Government committees, for example, on which I have served over the years. My experience, in a sense, started in my IBM days when I was asked to sit on committees. One of the earliest ones, as it happens, was the first Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment back in 1989, I think, which was responsible for one of the better Government regulations—the landfill tax—which, because it was announced with reasonable notice and because it has been progressively moved up, has been one of the more successful environmental measures. That is by the way. That, if you like, was some experience. Sitting on a committee and working with a Government Department is one sort of experience. A totally different one was the Atomic Energy Authority. As has been said, in going for a privatisation, you have a very different relationship with Government. At times it becomes fairly forthright. Again, it is a question of making sure that you understand the real implications, and then working with people to get a solution that is satisfactory all round.

In the MRC, one of the issues was that there was from time to time some pressure to do more in a certain area. I remember at one stage there was a big campaign because we were not doing anything much on autism. The problem there was that there was not enough good research being done for us to fund. I was absolutely determined that we should not lower our standards just because it happened to come in this area. We had to have stuff that we could stand behind and say was valid.

I served for some years as chairman of what was called the Industrial Development Advisory Board, which was part of the then DTI, and advised Government on major investment decisions, such as a new car plant: it might go to Italy or France or come here, and should Government support it in some ways? That was fine, but occasionally there was a certain amount of pressure that we should do something that from a business standpoint we thought did not stand up. So I had to try and deal with that type of situation. At other times it is purely communication. The Government would like something put out perhaps before you feel you are really ready to do it in the most responsible way. There are times when it is important that one has a position and is able to defend it, but, at the end of the day, one knows that the Government have the ultimate responsibility.

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**Q32 Roger Williams:** You have touched on it a little, but you have obviously had a lot of experience of working with Government. How will that inform your opinion of how you are going to do the job in the future, looking forward?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** The most important thing is communication. It is keeping in touch with people in Government. You have the obvious people in the Department with whom you would expect to have regular contact, but it is important also to have contact at the most senior level, to make sure that you understand one another and that there are no surprises. That is the most important aspect. Having been there, one knows the significance of it and I would expect to be able to handle it.

**Q33 Roger Williams:** This Committee was critical in the past of the former chairman and his lack of communication about the issue of the British Antarctic Survey. Are you aware of that? Are there any lessons to be learned for the future?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** I am only aware of the situation as one would be by reading the transcript and so on. As you would expect, I thought it sensible to do that, but I couldn't comment on whether the judgments made were necessarily fair or timely. I just don't have that information.

**Q34 Roger Williams:** Does it give you any indication about how the job should be carried out in the future?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** As I said, communication is fundamental; it is important that people don't get surprises and that they feel they have time to evaluate the things they need to evaluate. It is all very well for you to do a thorough evaluation, but people must have time to respond to it and to make sure that they endorse or have an opportunity to disagree. The generic answer is that one should enable that.

**Q35 Jim Dowd:** Sir Anthony, I was interested in one of your responses to Roger. You referred to the autism question at the MRC. You said that you did not think that there was sufficient high-quality research going on. Is it not the role of the MRC, NERC or other Government-sponsored organisations to promote—not simply to reflect—research? If you felt that there was not sufficient quality research out there, should you not have identified a programme to encourage it?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** We did; that is exactly what we did. We then put out a call for people who wanted to do research in this area, to bring in some ideas so that we could fund that. Of course, that takes time and is not going to provide the sort of response that people would like when there is pressure publicly that this is an area that we are not handling properly.

**Q36 Jim Dowd:** Did you feel that that was ultimately successful and it promoted—

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**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** I don't think I was there long enough, to be honest, to say whether it really tackled it. One of the issues that is vital—certainly it was true at the MRC and I am sure is true here—is that there is going to be some research that is either curiosity research, if you like, blue skies, or however you define it, which is going to take a long, long time to have what is now called “impact.” That is one of the challenges for the research councils.

If you look at the various things that have come out of the MRC, one of the most important is monoclonal antibodies, which today are vital for dealing with potentially a whole range of diseases. It took 30 years from the time that Millstein and Co. developed that stuff at Cambridge to the time that you could see the practical implications. There are going to be those situations. That is one of the challenges that I was referring to earlier. How do you try and ensure that, as far as you can, you support at least some of those opportunities?

**Q37 Jim Dowd:** Sarah mentioned this point during her questions, but could you enlarge upon how you envisage your role in engaging with Government during the next spending review if you were to be the chair of the NERC?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** Obviously, one will start internally in understanding the current budget and what one would like to do and so on. There will clearly be guidance from the Department initially. One will then put the two together, and inevitably they won't match. One will then have to try and decide how one is going to move things in one direction or another. One of the differences that I do anticipate from when I was at the MRC is that there is a lot more interworking between the councils. RCUK, as a structure, was only formed during my time at the MRC, so it was still in its infancy. As I understand it, that has developed well and quite a lot has come out of that. Nowadays there are quite a lot of shared services. My understanding is that, in some cases, it is not just back office services that are shared between the councils, but they are now are extending into parts of the Department itself where there are opportunities from scale to get benefits. Again, that is an area that one will explore very thoroughly through the CSR. There are areas to look at but I wouldn't anticipate it being an easy ride.

**Q38 Jim Dowd:** You said “areas to look at.” I don't know whether you have looked at this in detail yet, but you would certainly have to if you were to be appointed to this post, and that is on the capital requirements for NERC. The Chancellor has made various statements in the recent past, and they look marginally positive, without putting any particular value on them. Have you made any assessment of that? Where do you think they are?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** I honestly haven't looked at the detail in it. I am aware that some aspects of NERC's work are heavily dependent on capital, such as the British Antarctic Survey, and the physical resources that you need to do that sort of work. That is true, probably, of all the centres to some degree. I would imagine that capital could be an issue. As you say, my understanding is that general comments have been made that that is understood, but whether it is, I don't know.

**Q39 Jim Dowd:** But I could offer you the answer yes to my question: would you make this a priority if you got this job?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** It is obviously one of the starting points.

**Q40 Chair:** Following that line of questioning a little further, one of the things in our short sharp report that covered BAS and the National Oceanography Centre was the comments we made about things like ships' contracts, where, clearly, there is potential for better value for money to be found there. Do you think that you could knock enough heads together without forcing ill-thought-out mergers the way that we saw that? The case for savings existed but the case for the merger was a different set of arguments. Do you think that you can cope with that kind of tension inside the scientific community, because they all seemed to be pulling in different directions at that time?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** It is very difficult and I would be foolish to say that there is any simple answer to it. It is something that one will have to look at, understand as fully as possible, and then it may well be that one will have to say, "We think in the interests of the council, the Department and the country that this is what we need to do." You can't always carry everybody with you. It is fatal to believe that. On the other hand, you need to understand the arguments very thoroughly.

**Q41 Chair:** You will know some of your fellow chairs of the other research councils. You mentioned RCUK in response to Jim Dowd. Do you think that there is a realistic opportunity by which there can be greater working together to get better value for money for the public purse?

**Sir Anthony Cleaver:** I would have thought there should be. I don't know how many of the chairs I know. I certainly know two of the others off the top of my head. I am sure if I looked I would probably find that, at one time or another, I have worked with, for or against some of the others. I would expect that to be an opportunity that we could exploit.

**Chair:** Sir Anthony, thank you very much for your attendance this afternoon. The formal process, as you know, is that we will deliberate on the discussion we have just had and will report both to the House and to David Willetts. Thank you for attending this afternoon.