



Oral evidence: [FCO consular services](#), HC 905

Tuesday 25 February 2014

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Members present: Sir Richard Ottaway (Chair); Mr John Baron; Mike Gapes; Mark Hendrick; Sandra Osborne; Mr Frank Roy; Sir John Stanley; Rory Stewart

Questions 91-138

Witnesses: **Sir Michael Arthur KCMG**, former British Ambassador to Germany and former High Commissioner to India, and **Giles Paxman CMG LVO**, former British Ambassador to Spain and Mexico, gave evidence.

Q91 Chair: Order. May I welcome members of the public to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee? This is the second evidence session in our inquiry into the FCO's consular services and it will cover the way in which the FCO organises and prioritises consular services, as well as the demands on consular services in practice, including the expectations of the general public. We are delighted to welcome two former ambassadors with experience in the field: Sir Michael Arthur, who is the former British ambassador to Germany, and Giles Paxman, who is the former British ambassador to Spain. Gentlemen, I welcome you both very much. Thank you very much for coming along.

If I could open the batting, as it were, as ambassadors, what did you find the most challenging aspects about the provision of consular services by your embassies? What sort of issues absorbed most of your time and effort?

Sir Michael Arthur: We have rather different experiences. Giles's experience, having handled enormous numbers in Spain, was rather different from mine in Germany, where the British consular challenges are a bit less. You did not mention it, but I was previously a High Commissioner in India.

Chair: I beg your pardon, yes.

Sir Michael Arthur: In a way, that raised more issues for consular work—for me at least as head of mission—than was the case in Germany. In India, it was a lot of distressed travellers who got into trouble—perhaps sent to jail, and so on—plus the legacy of a British community still there, sometimes needing help. In Germany, in a country that worked extremely efficiently, you get the odd overnight problem from somebody who had too much to drink in Berlin, but it was not as acute as it is in other parts of the world. Our issues there were more with handling passports and notarial type of work, but not the crisis that you get in a tsunami or in a third-world country.

Giles Paxman: In a way, the challenges that the Foreign Office faces are not that dissimilar to the challenges that any Government Department faces in delivering a high-

quality public service at the highest possible level in a time of austerity. In Spain, we had getting on for 14 million British visitors every year. We had somewhere short of a million British residents. That generates a huge volume of work. The task for the Foreign Office, for our consular team, is to deliver the best possible service we can but within the limits of the resources we have. Where consular work differs from some other Government services is that in some cases—well, in all cases—you are dealing with real people, but often real people who are in a situation of extreme distress and in an alien environment, where they have no one else to turn to. They do not have a brother-in-law or a cousin living down the road. They do not understand the system, so the pressures on the Foreign Office to deliver a high-quality service are very high. In a time of limited resources, we have to be selective about what we do. That creates the additional challenge of trying to inform and communicate about what we can and cannot do.

Q92 Chair: Mr Paxman, following on from that, do you think that the public have reasonable expectations of what they can expect from the Foreign Office?

Giles Paxman: I am not really sure, to be honest, that the public in normal times have any real expectations of what the Foreign Office and its consular service can deliver, but when they get into trouble, they certainly do. They naturally have very high expectations, and they want to get the best possible service. As I say, our task is to try to stop them getting into trouble in the first place by giving them the best possible information, and if they do get into trouble, to be as sympathetic as we can and treat them as real individuals, and to explain what we can and cannot do.

In many ways, the consular service does not solve problems; it facilitates solutions. There are different ways of doing that, but you have to try to treat people as real people—as individuals—and not just as another consular case that just walked in through the door. If you can do that, and if you can get across the information up front that enables them to understand what we can and cannot do and why, I think you have got a long way down the road.

Sir Michael Arthur: If I could just add to that, I think there has been huge progress in the past few years in managing expectations, with campaigns such as “know before you go” and working with the travel industry and so on, so that people are better prepared for travel. There are a vast number of people—something like 70 million UK visitors overseas every year—and there is much better preparation. That is part of managing expectations.

Q93 Chair: If expectations are unrealistic, whose fault is it? Or is it just human nature that when you are in trouble, you expect the world?

Sir Michael Arthur: I am not sure that they are that unrealistic. It is just that, as Giles says, there is a limit to what can be done, and quite often people will understand that as long as you are being reasonable in how you handle it. I think the interface between the Government and the citizen needs such careful handling, particularly when that citizen is distressed.

Q94 Chair: Does either of you feel that the Foreign Office offered less consular assistance in your day than it does now?

Giles Paxman: Let me comment first. I was first an ambassador, or high commissioner, 10 years ago. I think in that 10 years, there has been a huge change in

direction of travel for the Foreign Office, which has been in the right direction. I am sure that there is more to go, but in terms of the Foreign Office recognising that interface—it is its main interface—with the citizen, that was not always perceived in those terms but it is now. In terms of training people for it, and so on—much better. But it is a journey. It is not finished.

Q95 Chair: Did either of you ever feel that you were unable to meet the legitimate expectations of the public?

Sir Michael Arthur: I was caught a bit in the tsunami. Do you remember the tsunami? I was caught at the wrong end. I was on a beach and got washed up and broke a rib, and all that, so I was more of a consular victim. I saw from inside what a huge amount of effort went in to trying to help the British people in Thailand, but the Foreign Office got a lot of criticism for how it was handled. That led to some quite radical thinking about better preparation for crisis management, which was right. At that stage, we were obviously not delivering what was needed, and I think we have learned from that. I do not know whether Giles agrees.

Giles Paxman: If I could just come back to your question about whether we are offering less assistance, the figures for Spain would tend to suggest that we are offering less assistance.

Q96 Chair: Now?

Giles Paxman: Less now than we were a couple of years ago. The question is: why, and is it a good thing or a bad thing? Obviously, if we are offering assistance, it is because people have got into difficulty and need helping. If we can stop people getting into difficulty by giving them information up front warning them of the sort of problems that they might get into, one would hope that we would have to offer less assistance. The figures that I have for the past couple of years show that we are dealing with slightly fewer cases of assistance than we were, despite an increase in the number of tourists. In a way, that is a good thing.

Q97 Chair: You have twice made this point now, so prevention is better than cure, in your view.

Giles Paxman: Absolutely, yes.

Q98 Sir John Stanley: My question flows out of what you have just said. Do you think that the demand for FCO consular services is on a remorselessly rising trend, particularly with the growth of international travel, or is your judgment that with the ever-advancing electronic age, the capacity of people for self-help through the electronic communications that they have might mean that the FCO could prudently plan on a reducing consular service? Which way do you think it is going to go?

Giles Paxman: I think it would be rash to plan on reducing the level of consular service. I think that, given the very clear trends—the increase in the number of British people travelling abroad, and also the increase in the number of British people living abroad, a phenomenon that we are only really now beginning to understand how to deal with—we have to plan on the likely work load, in a steady state, increasing. The question is: how can we ensure that we focus the resources that we have on dealing with the most needy cases, the most vulnerable people, the victims of the most difficult situations, and deal as efficiently as

we can, by electronic means or whatever and through information up front, with the less pressing and less urgent needs? I think that is the direction of travel of the current consular strategy.

Sir Michael Arthur: We have been talking so far mostly about tourists or travellers who have got into trouble, but don't forget, some of this is about much wider issues. In India, for example, we were helping people trapped or potentially trapped in forced marriages, and that, I suspect, will be a growing demand, just because the nature of the British population is leading to more cross-border partnerships. There is a need to adapt to these changes. If we carried on at the same rate, proportionally, of travellers needing help, we would be sunk, but because of the campaigns and because most travellers are now responsible, as you say, that is going down, but there are other needs besides that.

Q99 Mark Hendrick: Do you feel that Government policy and Government practice are moving in the right direction with regard to the provision of consular services?

Sir Michael Arthur: I think it is. As I mentioned a moment ago, this is now given a lot of attention in the Foreign Office and is seen as a vital interface with the British public. For the Foreign Office, it is the most important interface with the British public. Although the individual cases are micro issues—the rest of the Foreign Office work is rather macro stuff—the importance, the salience, of that is well understood.

Let me describe one of the challenges that comes out of a modernised way of handling this. Look at the structure of consular work across the world. I think there are 600 or 700 consular offices, but only 10% or 12% are UK-based, and a lot of those are in London, so you are now getting a lot of people out there—they are fantastically good. They are locally employed, sometimes British but often not British. These people make a fantastic contribution, but they live and work in that area and just do that job, and their managers are perhaps here or not directly part of the consular core. That needs modern management, so there are new challenges coming out of the changes, but it needs to stay mainstream for the Foreign Office.

Giles Paxman: I would entirely endorse that. I think consular work has a much higher profile in the Foreign Office now than it did a few years ago. I think that we as diplomats are much more conscious of the importance that Ministers, Members of Parliament and the general public attach to our getting it right, and, because of that, we have developed better policies, better tools and better training to enable us to deliver consular work, particularly in situations of crisis. Any ambassador who doesn't know that he is likely to be very much under the spotlight if he is unfortunate enough to get a crisis on his patch is deluding himself.

Could I also endorse Michael's point about staff? One of the slightly paradoxical situations that we are in at the moment is that although consular work has a higher profile and there are some extremely rewarding and challenging jobs to be done in the consular field, the number of those jobs for UK-based officers is considerably less now than it was in the past, and we are finding that it is becoming quite difficult to get some of those jobs. Meanwhile, we have a big cadre of locally engaged staff, who are taking more and more senior jobs. For example, in my position in Spain, I had—well, we slimmed down a bit. When I arrived, we had about 60 people dealing with consular work; when I left we had about 55. Only one of those was UK-based. All the others were locally engaged staff: very highly qualified and

highly trained, they know the country, speak the language and have perfectly legitimate career aspirations. One of the tasks that we face as an office is keeping them motivated and giving them the opportunities that will allow them to feel that they have a stake in wider consular work, and creating the opportunities for them and the mobility that enables them to carry on doing it.

Q100 Mark Hendrick: Any areas where you feel that there ought to be improvements and more resources?

Giles Paxman: As far as locally engaged staff are concerned, the big problem is mobility and being able to move the staff that we have, with the right skills and the right training, to different posts perhaps in different parts of the world, or back in London. The danger is that we will develop policy expertise from officers who spend maybe two or three years in the consular directorate in London, but then go on to some other type of Foreign Office work. Meanwhile, the people with all the hands-on experience of delivering consular work at the front line, as it were, do not have the opportunity of coming back to London, so I think that is a challenge.

In terms of overall resources, I think we will see increasing pressure on resources, partly because of the trends in demand that we have touched on, and partly, of course, because of the trends in the supply of resources and the pressure on Foreign Office resources generally.

Sir Michael Arthur: I agree with that. Do not forget, compared with some other countries, we have a different system for financing consular work. It is primarily financed by an element from the passport fee and from the consular charges that we impose, whereas some countries spend taxpayers' money, through budgets, on servicing overseas. The French do that. The Indians have a separate Ministry that runs overseas Indian affairs, because they provide a slightly different service. That resource constraint, if you are going to carry on funding it in the same way, is bound to have an impact. It means you have to do more slightly more efficiently and better. Hence all these campaigns.

On some of your inquiries looking at new means of communication—Twitter and so on—it is absolutely vital that the Foreign Office goes further in that way to communicate to the next generation of traveller.

Q101 Mark Hendrick: The FCO aims to be the best in the world by 2016. Do you consider that realistic, and how do you feel that the FCO compares with other foreign Ministries in providing consular services?

Sir Michael Arthur: I saw that ambition—it is since I left the Foreign Office. Obviously, it is a very good ambition to have, but how do you measure these things? They are all different. I genuinely think, as a citizen outside Government, we provide a very good service, but it is not perfect or excellent in all parts. Plenty of people complain about it for perfectly good and understandable reasons.

Each country is different. Germany has more legal requirements on what they have to provide overseas. They are less flexible than we are. A lot of French overseas residents can vote, which concentrates minds in a different way. It is hard to make comparisons between these different services.

Giles Paxman: I think it is fine as an aspiration. I agree with Michael that the problem is how you measure what is best in consular provision, but I think it is actually fine that we should aspire to be the very best we can, and we should aspire to have some sort of comparability with other services.

Q102 Mark Hendrick: Is there a benchmark as such?

Giles Paxman: Exactly—look at what they are doing, why they are doing it and the sort of performance levels that they get in delivering the services to the standards that they think they are doing. Quite where you end up in 2016 and how you decide whether you are the best, second best or third best, I really do not know. But the aspiration is fine.

Sir Michael Arthur: Canada runs a good service, in my experience. Some of the Scandinavians, on a very small scale, run a good service. So there are good people out there to learn from, or work with.

Rory Stewart: To develop this idea that Giles Paxman was leading on, the idea of expertise, there seems to be a potential to develop an elite corps of people specialised throughout their career in delivering consular services. There could be an argument that it is quite a different kind of work from policy work and does not require exactly the same skill set. What is your view on such development? I understand it is difficult—you have institutional and funding constraints—but if you were thinking in terms of 20 years and radical reform of the Foreign Office, could there be an argument for thinking about the consular service as almost a separate stream with a separate skill set?

Giles Paxman: We are moving in that sort of direction with the development of career anchors. Consulate is an important career anchor. Whether we will ever get to the point where we have an entirely specialised and separate consular service I don't know. The important thing is that we should put a real emphasis on training and giving people the skills that they need to do the job. Whether they need to do it for the whole of their career—or would want to do it for the whole of their career—I do not know. The Foreign Office traditionally thrives on having people who have two or three different career anchors.

We might find that it might be difficult in some ways to create a separate cadre because people would not want to do the same sort of work for all of their lives, particularly—and this is the key point—if the opportunities for going overseas are not there. At the moment what we are seeing is that the opportunities to do consular work overseas are being reduced, and one of the big motivators for people who come into the foreign service is the possibility of going overseas.

Q103 Rory Stewart: Just before Sir Michael comes in on this, to refine the question a bit more, there is an issue around the balance struck in the Foreign Office between management skills and deep area linguistic expertise. One of the reasons why it often feels like one is trying to square a circle, and people end up saying that there is no conflict between those—the senior management stream should reflect all those things and the core competencies do not need to be adjusted—is precisely because we are trying to design an office where an ambassador is expected simultaneously to be a really good manager of consular affairs, to be able to run a multidisciplinary platform, to be able to manage a budget and also to speak fluent Chinese and be an expert on Ming dynasty brushstrokes. Isn't that in a sense a way of

making us wake up and think that actually maybe the kind of person who does really well at consular stuff—somebody who is a real genius at managing people and most kinds of practical operational challenges—may not be the person who is an expert on Ming dynasty brushstrokes, and trying to pretend that they are the same person might not be constructive?

Sir Michael Arthur: I understand, absolutely, where you are coming from. Professionalism in how we handle consular work is necessary, and it needs more effort and training. But I strongly believe that consular work needs to be mainstream, in the sense that everybody needs to be in some way engaged in it. Most embassies are not very big, and when you get a crisis it is all hands to the pump. We train for that. There are crisis management plans in every post and there are exercises in that. That is right, because if the bomb goes off everybody has to help.

I would make a different change. I would not have people doing only consular work for all their career, for the reasons that we have just been going through; I would try to make as many as possible of the people who are going to become ambassadors learn consular young—do some consular on the ground—and get that experience. Quite often, the first time you really come face to face with real life consular problems is when you are an ambassador. That is not right as a preparation. How you get that into a busy life, in demand, is another issue, but ideally that is what I would like to see.

Q104 Rory Stewart: Very quickly, on resources, imagine that you were dictator of the universe and had full flexibility to think radically. Currently the Foreign Office reports that it spends exactly 3% of its budget on consular services—in other words, 97% of the budget is spent on other things. In an ideal world, do you think that really reflects 21st century Britain and the demands of citizens, and is the right allocation of resources? If for some reason some magic happened and the Treasury doubled your budget, what would you do in terms of spending on consular services?

Giles Paxman: Just to add a point on the previous question, it is important to understand that overseas we do effectively have a dedicated consular service. That is what the locally engaged staff who are delivering the consular service are and that is what they are trained to do. Sorry, what was the question?

Sir Michael Arthur: If we doubled the budget, what would we do then?

Giles Paxman: I can only answer this from the point of view of the posts that I have led. In Spain, I think that we had broadly the resources that we needed. That is a very broad response, but one of the distinguishing factors of consular work is that it tends to be rather seasonal. People tend to travel at the same times of year, so we would find, in Spain, that during the summer we would be frantically busy—people could not take any holiday and we would have to bring in additional staff. The winter was more devoted to training, catching up and developing our crisis management plans and the other management activities.

In the Canaries, it was slightly different. The work load was year round, because people go there year round. I felt that, overall, we did have broadly the level of resources that we needed, provided that we could keep the work load under control and that we could get out and do the outreach and the prevention work and get the information across to the potential customers.

Q105 Rory Stewart: Okay. One issue raised by Prisoners Abroad is that there is a deterioration of conditions even in European countries and that the number of Foreign Office visits to prisoners has declined significantly. They have linked that to the closing of 12 honorary consulates and consulates throughout the European network. Is this an issue? Is this a challenge?

Sir Michael Arthur: We have moved to the next question. I was going to add to your first question, on doubling the budget—I am not so sure in Europe, but certainly in India, you could just do with more people on the ground, partly because of the size of the country. If you have a prisoner—I was going to mention prisoners—in a funny part of India, and it takes you a week to get there, you could get there quicker if you had more people to do it. That would certainly be one of the things that one could do.

Are we doing enough on prison visits? If Prisoners Abroad is not happy, then the answer is clearly not. My experience of India is that, again, it is geography. In Delhi, where there are quite a lot of British people in jail, and in Mumbai, there were fairly regular visits, but when they are in further-flung places, it is less often that a consul officer can get there.

Q106 Mr Baron: Briefly, can I return to the issue of resources? You were asked how you would spend your budget if it was doubled. We know that there is pressure on resource—we have talked about expertise and reach, and so forth—given the numbers of British citizens travelling abroad and the increasing demands on the service. Do you think the FCO has got the balance right with the existing budget? The 3% was mentioned earlier. Some of us think that, actually, this needs to be given a higher priority.

Sir Michael Arthur: It is a question of what you think. The numbers of travellers are growing, as we have already discussed. The vast majority of those do not need help and probably do not want help, when they may be in a package tour with a travel company that has insurance and there has been liaison here, but there does not need to be liaison—

Q107 Mr Baron: But with respect, although I agree that the vast majority do not need help, the figures for those who do need help are still going up, if only as a factor of higher numbers travelling.

Sir Michael Arthur: Yes, and as they go to more far-flung places, they will get into more difficult trouble. I accept that, in those places, if we had more resources, we could do more to help.

Q108 Mr Baron: But, in answering the question, has the FCO got the balance right with its existing budget?

Sir Michael Arthur: Well, I think they are trying to shift resources away from, as it were, the easier countries—western Europe—towards the more difficult countries in Asia and Africa. That, to me, has to be right, given finite resources. But you do then hear complaints from people inside Europe, where there is less available than there was before.

Q109 Mr Baron: So the short answer is, you do not think they should have more than 3%.

Sir Michael Arthur: Given the resources they have, they are right to focus on the most vulnerable. I think that is right.

Q110 Mr Baron: You are doing a very good job, Sir Michael, of not answering the question.

Let me ask Mr Paxman. The bottom line is 3% and an existing budget. Would you attribute more of the budget to consular services?

Giles Paxman: I would tackle it from the other end. I think I would tackle it from the end of deciding what it is reasonable to do. That is not necessarily the same in every country. Take, for example, the previous question from Mr Stewart about prisoner visiting. There might be a need for more prisoner visiting in some countries than in others. If you are in a developed European country, for example, your prisoners perhaps need to be visited less than they might in another country. What you need to try to do is decide what level of provision you aspire to and then try to get the resources that will enable you to do that.

Q111 Mr Baron: And do you think the FCO has done that?

Giles Paxman: My response to the previous question, where I said that I thought that we had a sufficient level of resource in Spain—I think we have a sufficient level of resource in Spain to deliver the policy as it stands at the moment. Were we to decide to go back to the system that prisoners should be visited once a year, we would not have the resources to do that.

Q112 Mike Gapes: Can I take you to a different area of expatriate Britons—those who are not travellers but are living and settled in other countries? There are more than 5 million people with British passports; more than 2 million are in the European Union. You have both had experience of that. I remember going to Spain with the last Committee to discuss the issue.

I know from the situation in Spain that there was a big problem with elderly people who were trapped with the collapse of the Spanish property market and did not have connections in this country. Are we doing enough to assist the expatriate community? By charging for services in the way that we do, do we undermine the relationship with expatriates? Or should we just accept that, because people are no longer living in the UK, the UK Government's offer to them is necessarily limited?

Giles Paxman: On that last point, the offer is necessarily going to be limited. If we have between 800,000 and 1 million British residents in Spain for at least part of the year, we will never be able to provide them with all of the services that they would like us to. That is very clear.

We have to try to stick to a number of key principles. The first is that it does not seem unreasonable to say that, if someone chooses to go and live abroad, their first port of call, if they have a problem that can be sorted out by the local authorities in the country in which they live, should be those local authorities and not HMG.

The second point is that it seems right that, in dealing with the sort of problems that expatriates have, HMG should focus clearly on the most vulnerable and needy and try to identify those. It could be because they are old, infirm, disabled, have mental problems or whatever. We should focus the resources we have on the most needy.

The third point is partnership. It became clear to me when working in Spain that we have to work in partnership because the volume of British people living abroad is now so great, we have to work through partners. Those partners can either be with the local authorities in the countries in which we are living and working or through the expatriate community. One point that struck me in Spain was that among the expatriates we had considerable riches, both in skills and experience—former doctors, nurses, firemen, policemen—who had something to give back to the community. They also had the big resource of a lot of time on their hands. A lot of these people are retired or at least semi-retired.

If we can marshal those resources and help them act as intermediaries for getting out information and helping the community we can use them as multipliers, because we are never going to be able to satisfy the whole demand ourselves. That is what is happening and it is a win-win situation for everyone. We have to try to help British people living abroad to become more integrated with the communities in which they live, and we have to help them help themselves.

Q113 Mike Gapes: Sir Michael, your experience in India would be slightly different, because in the British Indian community and diaspora there will be people who are British citizens but are maybe married to someone who remains an Indian citizen and some of their children might be Indian and some British. As a constituency MP, I have dealt with property disputes within families or marital breakdowns. They get very difficult, where people come to me as a British MP wanting me to intervene with the Indian authorities on behalf of an issue that is to do with India. Do you get many things like that coming to you as an ambassador in India?

Sir Michael Arthur: First, before I come to India, the German experience is very different from what Giles just described for Spain, because the British resident community in Germany tends to be either a working population or married to a German and are therefore there for other reasons. So the type of problems that you experienced in Spain don't really arise in Germany.

But in India, you are quite right, Mr Gapes, that there are bits of that. It tends to be older people who have been there an awful long time. The world has moved on since they first went to become resident in India, and it can throw up the sorts of problems that you described. Then you have to ask yourself—I think HMG and Parliament have to ask themselves—for a long-term non-resident who happened to have been born British, how far do HMG help them? That is not an easy answer. In a marital dispute involving an Indian, do HMG have a locus in trying to sort it out?

Q114 Mike Gapes: Did you find the demands to be much greater? Did the younger generation of British Indians have expectations because they were British citizens and lived in a democracy where the rule of law applies and where corruption isn't rampant, whereas in some other countries it might be? Did they have higher expectations of you to get things sorted?

Sir Michael Arthur: No. The young Brit who has gone there for business reasons and then found it all pretty corrupt and difficult, I think, on the whole, did that with his or her eyes open. The problems came more when you have cross-border marriages, a crime inside a

family, or a British citizen of Indian origin who had gone back to India, having perpetrated a crime. They became quite complicated, and we get quite a lot of those issues.

As I mentioned earlier, forced marriages is another very challenging area. We have talked a lot about locally employed staff overseas. I just want to put on the record what a fantastic job they do for Britain. Nowhere is that more evident than if you are dealing with a difficult forced marriage case, and you have probably an Indian national helping to find and sort out British citizens in trouble.

Q115 Mike Gapes: I have had experience of that as well.

Can I ask you about—Giles Paxman touched on this earlier—the career path of people working on the consular side? Is it an asset or a liability to your future career to spend a considerable period dealing with consular matters as a relatively young person in the FCO?

Sir Michael Arthur: There is not a huge number of people for the numbers we have given. The change—quite a dramatic change—has been that if it ever was a liability, it certainly is not now. It certainly is an asset now. There has been a big cultural shift in the last decade.

Giles Paxman: I certainly agree with that.

Q116 Mike Gapes: But there are also, as you have said, fewer posts for UK-based employees because there has been more and more local recruitment. That potentially means that you have a smaller number of people who have that expertise within the FCO as a whole, and therefore fewer potential ambassadors who have an understanding of these issues, as you said, Sir Michael, in their early life.

Sir Michael Arthur: It is the hands-on experience of dealing with a distressed national in a jail. You learn from that. That is an important formative process for people going on to managerial responsibility in that same area.

Q117 Mike Gapes: So how can we remedy this as we recruit more and more locally engaged people and therefore have fewer potential ambassadors or high commissioners who have had that experience?

Sir Michael Arthur: It is a challenge. That is exactly right.

Giles Paxman: I think it is a big challenge. One way in which we can help to remedy it is, I would suggest, by getting greater mobility for our locally engaged staff and bringing them back to London more often, with their hands-on experience.

Having said that, in my experience as an ambassador, it was quite rare for me to deal hands on, face to face, with people requiring consular assistance. Occasionally it would happen, but generally, the people requiring consular assistance were dealt with by people who were experienced and trained in doing that, and did it probably a lot better than I could. I fully agree with Michael—I have huge admiration for people who are doing this work day in, day out, and for the quality of service that they provide.

The ambassador's role is much more to provide overall leadership and motivation, and not even to manage, because management now on a day-to-day basis tends to be dealt with more and more on the regional level than on an individual country level. The role is to provide leadership and motivation and to be the face when big cases and crises arise. To do it hands on, as an ambassador, is really quite rare, but I would say that when you do get the chance to do it, it is enormously rewarding to be able to help real people. To have a real person in a situation of real difficulty and for you to be able to help them, and for them to go away feeling satisfied, is one of the most rewarding types of work that you can get as a diplomat—even more rewarding than commercial work and probably more rewarding than policy work.

Mike Gapes: It is one of the good things about being an MP sometimes.

Giles Paxman: Exactly.

Sir Michael Arthur: May I have one more sentence on that? In the way that the Foreign Office is restructured now there is a lot of training for and action in crisis management. They create teams from London and all around—regional teams—if there is a tsunami, a bomb or whatever, and fly them in. So quite a range of people will get limited shelf-life experience, but in a crisis situation, which is quite helpful.

Q118 Sandra Osborne: May I ask you about the role of honorary consuls? Are they an effective mechanism to provide consular services?

Sir Michael Arthur: My view on that is very strongly yes. I think there are 230 around the world, and that probably does not cover the consular correspondents, who in some countries are additional to that. Basically, they provide a service for free. In my experience, in both India and Germany, they are a tremendous extension of our own network. We are talking about consular affairs. In Germany, they are quite often a very high-profile, local figure in the city concerned, often with an office that they will dedicate to British consular work. I can think of one in particular, who is a German businessman, and he provided an extra secretary at his expense, who was there as a British consular officer and people would come to see her—nothing to do with the British taxpayer. They are a very good multiplier of what we do.

Giles Paxman: I agree. I think we get very good value from honorary consuls. One of the challenges is not to ask honorary consuls to do excessive amounts of notarial work—signing, certification and such things—which can be done by other means, preferably online, but to have them there as a resource with local knowledge, to be on the spot and to provide good-quality local advice. For example, with the case of the awful train crash in Santiago de Compostela, we have an honorary consul in Vigo and she was able to get up there in a couple of hours, to liaise with the local authorities whom she already knew and to work out that we had no serious British casualties—we had one person injured, but that was all. In the light of her initial report, we were able to gauge our response and to send some people up from Madrid—obviously we would do that, as a precaution—but not to call in a big team from elsewhere. So eyes and ears on the ground, liaison with local authorities and providing that first advice in time of crisis.

Sir Michael Arthur: May I just add to that? This is a wider FAC point, if not a consular one. These people are obviously employed, or engaged, to do consular work, but they do an awful lot beyond, and particularly if they are big players in the local community, they can be a fantastic asset for the ambassador and the team in terms of opening doors, knowing who is who and knowing what is happening. This is not a consular issue, it is beyond consular, but it is a further extension of British eyes and ears and impact in the countries concerned. We get tremendous value out of the honorary consul system.

Q119 Sandra Osborne: Is the balance right, or do we rely too heavily on this sort of low-cost method of providing services, rather than employing full-time staff?

Sir Michael Arthur: Take Germany, where we have five or six—perhaps seven—honorary consuls, and they are in the cities where we do not have a UK post. A UK post would have a locally employed person in it. An honorary consul would be the first port of call, but as soon as anything serious got going, the proper consul would take it over. It would only be at first—as with the Vigo person and the train crash.

Q120 Sandra Osborne: Is there more reliance on honorary consuls now than there was in the past?

Sir Michael Arthur: I suspect that that is the case. Certainly we have got better at finding the right people to do it. Honorary consuls are now a big asset, whereas in the old days they were not particularly. That is improvement.

Giles Paxman: And they are better trained, of course.

Sir Michael Arthur: And better trained.

Q121 Sandra Osborne: Was it a good decision to transfer responsibility for passports to the Home Office?

Sir Michael Arthur: It was unpopular in Germany. A lot of Germans felt that the distance made it more difficult to get a passport. I am not sure why that should be the case, but that was the gut reaction of people who were used to going to Dusseldorf but could not any more. It is a service that is provided postally. Logically, it is not hugely different to do it in the UK than overseas, but it is not popular.

Giles Paxman: I think people do not like change and if people are used to getting a passport from their local consulate, they are always happy to have it delivered in that sort of way. I think what we have found, since we closed the regional passport issuing office in Madrid last June, is that people have adapted quite easily to the change. Indeed, quite a lot of the comments that we have had on the “Brits living in Spain” Facebook forum suggest that people are happy. The idea of doing something in a more online, electronic way is not something that shocks people once they sit down to think about it.

Where I think the challenge now lies is in realising the economies of that and to enable the purchasers of passports to see the economies. It is still more expensive to get a passport overseas than it is at home and I think we need to look at the fees structure and see whether that differential is fully necessary. Clearly, if we could reduce the cost, it would also reduce the reticence that is felt in some areas.

Q122 Sandra Osborne: It is interesting you should say that, because, as you may be aware, we have a web forum for this inquiry.

Giles Paxman: Yes, I have seen it.

Q123 Sandra Osborne: We have received a number of complaints on that about the passport service. One person, for example, thinks that “UK citizens are paying a higher price for an inferior service to deliver the same product”. In other countries, passports are cheaper. Do you think that the service has deteriorated since the transfer?

Giles Paxman: I have not seen the performance statistics, so I cannot comment from a position of absolute knowledge on that. What I would say is that the team that I had in Madrid performed to very high standards; in some ways, they probably exceeded the standards that had been laid down. The need to transport the application back to the UK and then the final transport back out again is bound to add a little bit of time. Whether that is reasonable or not, and whether we are meeting the performance standards that we set ourselves, I am not really in a position to judge.

Sir Michael Arthur: Could I comment on that web comment? The fact is that our passports are more expensive than in many comparable countries, but that is because Parliament and successive Governments have decided that the passport fee should bear some of the cost of the service. That is a perfectly fair political decision for Parliament and Governments to have made. Other countries have decided to use taxpayers’ money in a different way. So I do not think that we should worry about the absolute level of it.

Giles’s point, which is interesting, is the differential between a passport delivered overseas and one delivered in the UK if it is coming back to the UK in the first place. That is the second point.

Q124 Chair: Coming back to honorary consulates for a second, what is the motive for being an honorary consul? You gave the example that someone went several hours after a train crash to help. Why do they do it?

Giles Paxman: There are various motivations: genuinely public-spirited people who want to perform a public service and feel that they have the time to do that. I do not think that we should underrate that. I think that there are a lot of them.

It is also fair to recognise that being the British honorary consul gives you a certain status locally that you might not have. I think that it also gives you a certain amount of access to the local authorities that you might not otherwise get. So if you are working, for example, as a local lawyer, it can be advantageous to your business also to be the honorary consul and have access to the mayor and the local authorities.

But there is a very big element of public-spiritedness in it as well. I think the motivation for most of our honorary consulates is certainly not financial. What we pay them is a very small amount of money in relation to what they could earn for a similar number of hours in their private business.

Sir Michael Arthur: I think it is not at all financial. I completely endorse that. From my experience in Germany they were often very high profile people. For example, one was

the head of Barclays bank in Frankfurt; another was the head of a big bank in Hamburg; a third was the CEO of a company that owns a big pharmacy in the UK but is a general company—that type of thing. There is normally a link to Britain but they do it because they find it both interesting and quite prestigious.

In India there is a slightly different category, which is the long-term British national resident who is giving something back to the community, feels that they want to help and wants to feel part of the family. That is a slightly different motivation. But it is never money.

Q125 Mr Roy: If I was a cynic, which I usually am, and I just heard you saying that being an honorary consul gives you access and status, but at the same time there is no requirement for the consuls to disclose their financial and business interests before they are appointed, I would think, is that not dangerous? You have said that they get access and status, but do not need to declare their financial interests.

Sir Michael Arthur: The ones I am conscious of are all relatively public figures and their assets and interests would be on the public record anyway.

Q126 Mr Roy: But they do not have to declare their financial and business interests before the appointment. Is that not very dangerous given that they get status and access?

Giles Paxman: Obviously in the selection of honorary consuls one would carry out a certain number of inquiries and ask them about their business interests, but perhaps you have a point there—perhaps there should be a greater degree of transparency and public openness about exactly what their business interests are. Most of the honorary consuls that we had in Spain—we had 13, I think—tended to be slightly less high profile figures than yours, Sir Michael; they tended to be local lawyers and business people who were just going about their own business. But I agree that openness is probably a good thing.

Sir Michael Arthur: If I could just add another point, it is not always obvious that their contract or their duration as honorary consul comes to a natural end. It does not hurt to have a cut-off point, so you can renew if necessary but not renew if not. That would be another change I would make.

Q127 Mr Roy: But they are set to renew every five years, are they not?

Sir Michael Arthur: It is five years, but sometimes there is an issue about whether we want them to go that long.

Q128 Mr Baron: Returning to resources, after the previous decade of perceived failings with regard to a series of minor crises, reforms were introduced. Are you both confident that the new crisis response systems put in place by the FCO are fit for purpose? I am conscious that Hurricane Wilma is particularly relevant to you.

Giles Paxman: I had to do Wilma; I also did swine flu in Mexico and volcanic ash in Spain. I don't think we will ever be entirely confident. When you are dealing with a crisis you are by definition dealing with a situation that is unpredictable. Your plan will never go entirely according to plan and you will always get things wrong, so you can always get better. That is the short answer.

Having said that, I am absolutely convinced that we are now much, much better prepared than we were, particularly before the tsunami in Thailand. We have much better structures. We have clearer policy and better organisation. We have a fully equipped and well-staffed crisis centre. We have much better tools. We have regional rapid deployment teams with the right skills. We have the right partnerships with the emergency services. We have the right planning—better planning—overseas, and better liaison with the local authorities overseas. We are much better prepared now than we were but we will never be totally prepared. There will always be situations that will arise in places where we will not expect them to arise, and we will have to make it up. The essential thing is that you have the plan in the first place, and that you have exercised and trained. That gives you the starting point from which you can work.

Q129 Mr Baron: While accepting that no disasters are predictable, what you are saying, again, is that there is no need for extra resource in this area and you are happy with the structures as they are in place, and the response systems.

Giles Paxman: I am happy that we are getting better. I think that we need to develop our structures and look at what other people are doing. After every crisis there is a lessons learned exercise, so we see what we could have done better and try to put the right improvements in place.

Sir Michael Arthur: If Parliament wanted things such as undertakings to repay and service assisted evacuations to be free to the citizen, they could be paid for, but it would require a decision by Parliament and resourcing consequences. Can I add to Giles' point about how much we are being prepared for crises? I agree with that, but do not forget that in many of the areas in which crises may occur the local authorities may be in a mess as well. Therefore, British citizens may suffer because the local authorities do not operate as well as they do in this country.

Mr Baron: Point taken.

Q130 Chair: Moving on to the digital world, the Foreign Office is providing more of its advice on a website and through social media. Do you go along with that? Do you think it is the right approach?

Sir Michael Arthur: I think strongly that it is the right approach. We need to use all means of communication, but that is a particularly important one. I want to take this opportunity to make a point that has not yet come up. A huge amount of effort goes into the travel advice that is on the FCO website and is distributed in other ways. It is right that a lot of thought goes into it and it is kept up to date. I always advise people to use it. Part of my family happens to be in that sort of business, and they say that people are using it actively now and that it has got better.

Giles Paxman: I agree. I think we have to communicate through the media that people use. The power of outreach of some of the social media is absolutely phenomenal. That said, there is the problem of getting people to pay attention before they need to do so. I do not think we will ever get beyond the situation where we need to have some direct communication with people. I would like more use to be made of the opportunities to get to real people and real travellers when they are travelling or just before they are travelling,

through airports, airlines, tour reps and those sorts of people, so people are really focused on when they are going and where they are going and you can have a greater communication with them about the sort of difficulties that they might face. You need communication and more communication, I'm afraid.

Q131 Chair: We have scrapped the traditional registration service. Was that inevitable? Do you agree with it?

Giles Paxman: Yes. LOCATE was not a successful tool. It was difficult to get people to register, and when they did register they did not de-register, so you didn't really know where people were. The initial results that we have had from the crisis hub, which is a "just in time" type of tool, are quite promising.

Q132 Chair: Mr Paxman, you said that you had to go at 4.30 pm. We have two groups of questions left. Can you stick around for a few more minutes?

Giles Paxman: I think I will manage to postpone my appointment by 10 minutes.

Q133 Mike Gapes: Can I take you back to the issue of people who have been detained overseas? How much consular time is taken up by providing services to British nationals who are detained or imprisoned?

Sir Michael Arthur: I have not got the accurate facts, but I can give you a feel for it. In Germany, very little; in India, much more. I remember that our consular officer who did the prison visiting was down at Tihar jail regularly—once every two or three weeks.

Q134 Mike Gapes: So you couldn't quantify it as a percentage of the total work that a high commission or an embassy had to do?

Sir Michael Arthur: Way under 10% of consular time, I would guess.

Giles Paxman: The figures that I have for Spain suggest that, for example, last year we had 1,601 arrests and detentions, out of a total assistance load of 4,681 cases, so it is quite a lot. The important point to bear in mind is that there are different types of detainees and different types of arrest. We have been trying to gauge our response according to that. The need to make contact with and visit someone who has had one or two extra drinks the night before and been arrested, put in jail and will be released that same morning is rather less than the need to visit and pay attention to people who have been arrested for serious crimes and are likely to spend longer in jail.

Q135 Mike Gapes: Are you confident that we provide the appropriate level of support to those detained or imprisoned abroad? How, in your experience, does it compare with the support provided by other countries?

Sir Michael Arthur: In my experience—it is hard to quantify these things—we do it more than others and occasionally we do it for others. If you are going to visit a prison in a far-flung part of India, you find out whether the Canadians have got somebody there and go and see them, too. My sense is that we do more of it than our comparators. How much can we help? There is a limit to what you can do for someone who is in jail, but you can try to ease

their life a bit, help with communications with the family and you can help at the margins in making life a bit less disagreeable.

Q136 Mike Gapes: Clearly, as Members of Parliament we have all had cases with constituents. I had a constituent in Dubai—it was a high-profile case last year—who was sentenced to four years in prison, but they were eventually released. The expectations of the public and the families here is often high. Is there any way we can deal with that mismatch between people's expectations and the reality that you cannot change the legal system of another country or get someone out?

Sir Michael Arthur: It is perfectly understandable that the families feel as they do. It goes back to communication, explaining and trying to do your best while ensuring that they understand what is not achievable. Every case is different and it needs proper human handling. It might not always be right, but it needs to be done.

Giles Paxman: I think there are essentially two reasons for visiting people in prison, whether they are on remand or already sentenced. The first is to be sure that they are being treated according to international standards and are not in some way being subjected to inhumane treatment. The second is to ensure that they are aware of how the legal system in the country works, the means of recourse available to them and the advisability of getting a good lawyer. We cannot provide them with legal advice through the consular service. In a modern European country, the need to visit people to verify the standards in which they are being held is probably rather less than in some other countries. We can, in line with our focus on the most needy, perhaps move towards an approach that is more triggered by demand from the prisoner than automatically visiting people who might not necessarily want or need to be visited.

On the need to ensure that people are aware of the systems within which they work, we provide quite a lot of advice. That system will not generally change. People will automatically be visited as soon as they have been sentenced and put in jail. Once you have explained the system to them, there is a limit to the extent to which you can carry on explaining. It is the task of their lawyer to take them through that. We need to have a system that ensures that if people are not getting the right information or are being badly treated, they can contact us and we can approach them, rather than saying that people automatically need to be visited every six months or every year or whatever. The third reason for visiting people, which I should have mentioned, is to help them through the process of getting transferred back to the UK, if they are transferable under a prisoner transfer agreement.

Sir Michael Arthur: Sometimes there is a language issue as well. There can be cases in a particular prison where a tiny change would help the life of the prisoner. I remember being involved in one in India. As a result of a prison visit with our consular officer when something needed to be done by the prison authorities, we got it done. It was a tiny thing, but it helped.

Q137 Rory Stewart: We have received reports that consular services are not adequate in relation to deaths abroad, particularly murder, and that there has been lack of provision of specialised training for Foreign Office personnel. We have had many anecdotes about people not really understanding the deep difference between someone dying abroad and someone

being murdered abroad. Do you think there is an argument for more focused training specifically in the response to murder?

Giles Paxman: It sounds to me that the answer should be yes, but I have not come across that. A lot of attention goes into training, but clearly if there is a complaint or a worry about that, the service is not being provided adequately. The answer is probably more training.

Sir Michael Arthur: I agree. If we purport to be a customer-oriented organisation, we need to listen to what customers are saying. It is also entirely in line with the focus of consular strategy, which is to focus on the people who most need help.

Q138 Rory Stewart: Finally, to conclude, you have been quite optimistic about the Foreign Office and you have provided a good picture of it. That tends to be our experience of taking testimony from serving and recently retired officials. How is it possible for the Foreign Office to understand how it is performing? How do you really know that your upbeat and positive account of the Foreign Office is credible? We would have heard that 15 years ago from people you now say were not doing such a good job, and you recognise there have been many improvements in the past 15 years? I fear I may be sitting here in 15 years and people will be saying that what we are doing now was not so great. How are you so confident in your cheery assessment?

Sir Michael Arthur: We are being confident about the direction of travel, not the arrival. Things like your study and the other information you receive is good for the Foreign Office. It will read it carefully and take due lessons from it. It is a process.

Giles Paxman: I agree that we cannot be complacent, but I am absolutely confident that, for example, in our response to crises we are much better placed now than we were 10 years ago. There is no doubt about that.

In the use of our resources on consular work and the focus that we give to the use of those resources on the people who need them most, we are much better placed. In the training and skills within the consular service, we are in a better place. Are we the best and can we get better? Yes, of course we can get better, and that is what we must do.

Sir Michael Arthur: Have you taken evidence from Canadians or Australians about how they see our services?

Rory Stewart: Not yet.

Mr Baron: The other answer to Rory's questions is of course that history is relative.

Chair: Thank you both very much. You have been very helpful.