



Oral evidence: [Human rights](#)

HC 860

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Members present: Crispin Blunt (Chair); Ann Clwyd; Mr Mark Hendrick; Yasmin Qureshi; Andrew Rosindell; Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 1-45

Witness: **David Mepham**, UK Director of Human Rights Watch, gave evidence.

[This evidence was taken by video link]

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee’s inquiry into human rights. I am delighted to conduct a session—for the first time via video link—with David Mepham, the UK Director of Human Rights Watch. David, welcome and please formally identify yourself for the record and so that we can test the equipment.

David Mepham: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. I am David Mepham, the UK Director of Human Rights Watch. Thank you for being so accommodating in allowing me to join you from New York via video link. Obviously, I would have preferred to be there in person, but I appreciate this opportunity to give evidence.

Q2 Chair: David, the written evidence that you submitted was fairly coruscating about the change in priorities on human rights. Has the Government deprioritised human rights? I anticipate that your answer will be, “Yes” and, if so, in your judgment why has the Government done that?

David Mepham: The short answer to the first question is yes. I think the change has not occurred since the election, but it is probably linked to the change of Foreign Secretary from William Hague to Philip Hammond. There appears to be a deprioritisation of human rights in the Foreign Office. We have seen that reflected, for example, in relation to British policy towards countries such as Egypt, China, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and we can come on to some of those examples later. “Why?” is a good question; I think that you are seeing the Human Rights Minister either later today, or shortly, and she will provide the Government’s position on this matter.

I think the Foreign Secretary has a scepticism about human rights; that is certainly what I pick up from his public statements. I think that he is intellectually not persuaded that rights should be at the heart of foreign policy in the way that his predecessor believed. He is sceptical about whether human rights are really so central and he is concerned about issues of

security and prosperity. Sometimes, these require trade-offs, is the way that he would put it, I think. He appears to give the impression that human rights people like us are a little bit naive and idealistic, and that actually in the real world you have to get on with stuff and deal with unpleasant people. I don't want to provide his rationale for him, because he will do that for himself.

Q3 Chair: He might not want to when it is presented like that.

David Mepham: As I say, you must ask him and the Minister responsible for human rights, but there appears to be a scepticism about human rights that did not exist before.

Q4 Chair: Has any of that been evidenced in your interaction with Ministers and their interaction with other human rights agencies known to you, and if so, how?

David Mepham: We have a very good relationship with the human rights and democracy team. They are an excellent bunch of people, who are very committed to these issues and push them energetically. We have a very good relationship with many parts of the Foreign Office. Human Rights Watch, and I am sure that this is true for Amnesty as well and other organisations, goes in and out of the Foreign Office regularly, meeting colleagues and working on Middle East issues, aid issues or whatever it may be. People are generally pretty receptive and welcoming of our analysis of what is happening in particular countries. I think that the change has come from Ministers; I think that the shift in emphasis has come from the new ministerial team that, as I say, seems more sceptical that human rights concerns should be as central to foreign policy as was arguably the case in the recent past. We get access; we talk to Ministers; and we meet them. The advisory group continues, and I think that Philip Hammond has had one meeting with us since the election. That is a very useful forum for human rights organisations to share our concerns, but there has been less responsiveness to the kind of arguments that we are making.

Q5 Chair: We have had evidence from other human rights lobbies that have welcomed the FCO's shift to three key themes and believe that that will help their work. What is your view of the institutional effect of the shift to three key themes? Do you think that will have adverse or beneficial implications?

David Mepham: To be honest, I think it is too soon to say. In principle, Human Rights Watch has no problem about the Foreign Office reconfiguring the way in which it structures itself in respect of human rights. Of course not, but it is too early to say whether these three themes that replaced the former six priorities represent a more useful way in which to structure the Foreign Office's work on human rights.

As I said in my written submission, it is not entirely clear at first glance how torture will be dealt with under this new arrangement. We have these three pillars that talk about the rules-based system and so on, but torture cuts across all three, so what will that arrangement mean for that or for freedom of religion and belief, or the death penalty? How will they sit within that new structure? It may well be that the Minister can explain and articulate that when she appears before your Committee, but at the moment that is not entirely clear from the outside, and it has certainly not been particularly well articulated thus far.

Q6 Chair: Before I turn to my colleagues to continue the questioning, could we consider one of the countries that you cited? In terms of the Foreign Office's priorities on Egypt, which you highlighted as the worse example of human rights abuses, and since the Committee is about to visit Egypt, could you tell us why you think the Foreign Office is not pursuing those issues effectively?

David Mepham: Sure. I am delighted to hear that the Committee will be going to Egypt. I dealt with it very briefly in my written submission, but I am sure that Human Rights Watch and other organisations could provide some more material about what is going on there if that is helpful.

We are deeply concerned about the human rights situation there and we would describe it as the worst human rights crisis in Egypt for decades. And yet it appears, and I said this in my written submission, that the UK Government is trying to be upbeat about what is going on there. I gave a couple of quotes in my written submission and perhaps is worth mentioning them now to the Committee. The Middle East Minister, when describing Egypt, talked about steps that it was taking towards a "stronger democracy". He also said that UK-Egyptian relations were in a "very positive place." It is very hard to square those statements with the reality of what is going on. Since the coup, 41,000 people have been arrested and detained and hundreds and hundreds of people have been sentenced to death. I know, Mr Chairman, that you are familiar with the incidents in August 2013 in the Rabaa Al-Adawiya Square, when in a single day, Human Rights Watch documented 817 people being killed by the Egyptian security forces. That is probably the largest mass killing in recent history and probably bigger than the numbers killed in Tiananmen Square, and yet somehow our relations with Egypt are described as being in a "very positive place". I think that is deeply concerning.

Q7 Chair: But do we have a choice in terms of the overall relationship with Egypt, given the state of the Middle East at the minute? And if we have a choice, what other choice should we have taken other than the policy followed, and what should the Foreign Office be doing in pursuit of some of the issues to which you have referred?

David Mepham: Human Rights Watch is not advocating that we disengage from autocratic regimes around the world and that we stop dealing with them, talking with them or trading with them. That is not our position. Of course, Governments have to deal with other Governments, even extremely unpleasant ones with very bad human rights records. The question for the UK Government is what influence is it bringing to bear. How much are human rights concerns to the fore when British Ministers meet their Egyptian counterparts?

I am sorry to come back to the Middle East Minister Tobias Ellwood, but when he gave evidence to the predecessor FAC in March 2015, he was questioned by Mr Gapes—I do not know whether he is with you today—and couldn't recall whether he'd raised human rights concerns with his Egyptian counterpart. At a time of deep repression in Egypt and when a large business was accompanying the Minister to Egypt, it is pretty extraordinary that he couldn't recall whether human rights concerns had been raised.

It seems to me that as a matter of course and at every opportunity British Ministers should be pressing human rights concerns very strongly and vigorously. That does not guarantee results—of course not. We are not naive about that, but it ought to be a central aspect of the British relationship, but it appears that geopolitical considerations have come to

the fore and there is a view that, “Yes, Sisi is a strong man and we don’t like him, but he is somebody that we have to deal with.” I think the British Government, and other Governments around the world, should be trying to make the case for the Egyptian Government to be less repressive and less autocratic and really bringing pressure to bear on those issues.

Q8 Chair: We liked him enough to invite him to Downing Street. He is a graduate of the staff college.

David Mepham: Indeed. From all the public commentary, it appears that human rights concerns were barely raised in those exchanges. The conversation was probably about the wider politics of the region and what is going on in the Sinai, which is certainly very concerning. On Sinai, our view would be that we have done a lot of work on this, but the way in which the Egyptians are going about dealing with a very genuine terrorist threat in that part of their country is deeply counter-productive. They will radicalise the situation, rather than address it effectively, because of the bluntness and the crudeness of their counter-insurgency campaign.

Q9 Yasmin Qureshi: As you are aware, the Foreign Office has shifted its emphasis on three key themes: democratic values and the rule of law; strengthening the rules-based international system; and human rights for a stable world. In the light of the fact that there has been a reduction in the Foreign Office’s budget, how would you view whether it is adequately resourced to be able to deal with even the three themes that it wants to concentrate on?

David Mepham: The resource issue is obviously a big one, but we would clearly want to see more resources going into human rights and, arguably, the Foreign Office’s budget as a whole, but the spending review has concluded that budgets have been allocated and Ministers will have to deal with that. In response to the Chairman’s question, we don’t have a gut opposition to the Foreign Office reconfiguring its work around the three pillars. That is fine if they can articulate a strong case as to why they are doing it in this way. Thus far, however, it is little bit unclear.

I gave the example of torture, but one could talk about business and human rights or the death penalty. How are they going to fit within the three pillar structure, because they cut across all these issues? They are about democratic values and the rule of law, the rules-based international system, and about human rights for a stable world. From the point of view of an organisation like ours, which wants to have and in many respects does have a good relationship with the Foreign Office, we would like to know who is responsible for torture and who is responsible for the death penalty. Who do we need to go to? It has become a little vague, which can perhaps be clarified when the Minister gives evidence to your Committee.

Q10 Yasmin Qureshi: From what you are saying, that is building on what you started off with initially, which was that you felt that the Foreign Office, certainly at ministerial level, has said something about human rights, but it is not in the central core of the Foreign Office’s work. Do you think that this is linked with that in the sense human rights are not being valued in the same way as the predecessor, Lord Hague, used to value them?

David Mepham: For me, the three pillars are not the big issue. There is a responsibility on the Minister—presumably, the Minister who comes to give evidence to your Committee—to articulate the rationale for the three pillars. If they can do that convincingly,

that's great. From my perspective so far, it is not entirely clear why the three pillars is an improvement on having designated priorities around torture, freedom of religion and belief, and business and human rights. It is not so clear why this new structure is a better one. But the more worrying point that I have continued to make in this session is that there appears to be a deprioritisation of human rights by the Foreign Office. There are some exceptions to that and I think that the Minister herself with responsibility for human rights has a strong personal commitment, but, overall, human rights seem to be less to the fore than was the case even 18 months ago. You mentioned William Hague, and, as you know, he used to talk very regularly about human rights being part of the "irreducible core" of UK foreign policy. The current Foreign Secretary has not repeated those kinds of statements, which I think is because he is, as I said, more sceptical about the role of human rights in foreign policy.

Q11 Andrew Rosindell: Good afternoon, Mr Mepham. What is your assessment of the Magna Carta Fund as a means of influencing human rights across the world?

David Mepham: Well, it is encouraging that the fund has been increased and that there has been an increase in the funds available for those kinds of projects. Human Rights Watch does not receive Government funding of any kind, so in some ways I am not able to comment on how well that fund has worked in the past or how well it might work in the future. I think it is an important issue for your Committee to look at, but all I would say about the fund is that there are obviously many parts of the world—Russia is perhaps a good example—where non-governmental or civil society organisations that are in receipt of international funding are increasingly being criminalised for that activity. In the Russian context, they are being denounced as potential traitors to the Russian system. The Foreign Office needs to think very carefully about how to make sure that it is allowing resources to go to legitimate human rights organisations, but not imperilling them by so doing. I do not have an answer to that, but it is an issue that the Foreign Office needs to think hard about, given this increasing tendency in many parts of the world to limit the space for civil society organisations and to clamp down. We see it in Russia of course, in China and in many other places where NGOs' capacity to act and to function is being restricted by Government regulations, often linked to foreign funding for those NGOs.

Q12 Andrew Rosindell: Do you think it is an effective fund to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, or are there other ways in which the money ought to be spent?

David Mepham: As I say, I cannot comment on individual projects. I know that the Foreign Office does quite regular reviews of an element of their portfolio, and to the best of my understanding those reviews have been very positive. My general sense—I have not looked at this in great detail—is that this is a good fund. I am encouraged that it has been increased.

There are certainly lots of worthwhile projects around the world that the Foreign Office should be and is supporting, but I think we need to get this into context and see that this is a relatively small amount of money. If you look at the Magna Carta Fund, as it is now called, in comparison with the money that the Department for International Development spends around the world on governance reform and many other issues of that kind, this is a very small budget. Obviously it is important to use that budget well and for your Committee to ask good questions of the Minister about how well it is being used, but I am more concerned in a way with the messaging and the positioning of the Foreign Office on these big

human rights issues as they affect China, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Egypt—that is where our critique comes in. We do not feel that human rights concerns are being given the prominence that they warrant in some of those bilateral relationships.

Q13 Mr Hendrick: The FCO’s assessment of its own performance is contained in its annual “Human Rights and Democracy Report”. Do you believe that this report provides an accurate indication of the FCO’s performance in relation to its human rights work overseas?

David Mepham: I feel that I am going to give a similar answer to the one I have just given. I am not avoiding the question, but because we are not ourselves recipients of any funding from Government, I am not that close to the individual projects that the Foreign Office is funding.

As I say, there are external reviews that I think have been quite positive. Everything I hear about it suggests that these projects are generally of high quality, are making a difference and are worth the Foreign Office funding and supporting, but I don’t feel I am in a position to give an overall perspective. It is a bit of a Foreign Office human rights issue that I do not really engage with, because we are not ourselves recipients of any funding from the Foreign Office, or indeed from any Government around the world. That is probably an inadequate answer, but I do not feel that I can add more to it than that.

Q14 Mr Hendrick: I think there is value in it. You seem to be saying that you think the Foreign Office does good work in the area of human rights, but, because of the deprioritisation, it is not going to be doing enough of it in future and probably nowhere near the amount that you would like to see.

David Mepham: Yes. Maybe I didn’t make that point. It goes wider than just the funding. I understand the importance in terms of accountability—to look at the funding of particular projects is a very important function. For the avoidance of any doubt, many Foreign Office officials—not just in the human rights and democracy team, but across the Foreign Office, and in embassies and high commissions around the world—are doing some excellent work with human rights, and I do not want to suggest that that is not the case. I have had interactions with many of them over the last five years that I have been doing this job. It is just that at the top level there is now less—I mean, you are of course very familiar with this as a Committee. When the permanent secretary came to you last September, he said, “although it is one of the things we follow, it is not one of our top priorities,” I am sure he did not intend to say it in that way, but the candour of what he said was consistent with what we have observed over that period of time. That is why we are so concerned about the level of political commitment to human rights.

Q15 Mr Hendrick: This is not something new or necessarily peculiar to the current Foreign Secretary. In the coalition Government from 2010, there was a clear emphasis to move the Foreign Office work more and more towards trade and further away from human rights and democracy. That started under Lord Hague, so although I think your characterisation of the current Foreign Secretary is accurate, the shift away from diplomacy and human rights towards a more trade-focused Foreign Office happened well before then.

David Mepham: I think that is true. Under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government from 2010 to 2015, there was more focus on business and trade, but

let's be clear: we are not against business and trade. Part of the difficulty here is suggesting that there are trade-offs and that one has to trade off trade for human rights, or security for human rights, or counter-terrorism for human rights. Actually, human rights should be at the core of all of these things: you get a more inclusive form of trade and prosperity if human rights are embedded, and you get more effective counter-terrorism if human rights are central to it, so I reject the trade-offs that are sometimes suggested in these areas.

Q16 Mr Hendrick: You may reject the trade-offs, but despite significant cuts to the Foreign Office budget, we saw significant increases in the number of Foreign Office staff and in UKTI staff that were created to go into places such as China. They did not go into China to talk about human rights; they went there to talk about trade and improving the business relationship between the UK and China.

David Mepham: I agree with you about that. One of the points that we make in our written submission is how important it is that whenever Ministers go abroad, particularly when they go with business delegations, the human rights perspective is also represented. There are many parts of the world where, frankly, there should be dedicated human rights experts on the ground, working with the high commissioner and the ambassador to make sure that the human rights perspective is to the fore. You are right that there has been more of a shift towards having business expertise represented, and there certainly isn't sufficient human rights expertise in the Foreign Office and particularly in some of these problematic countries. That is a budget issue, and I hope it is an issue you raise with the Minister to understand why there are not enough human rights people in key countries around the world. I agree with you.

Q17 Mr Hendrick: Do you not think that maybe the human rights question is seen as a bit of a side issue and is something that gets mentioned in passing, rather than a fundamental topic on the agenda for Ministers when they travel?

David Mepham: I think that is right. Again, I am sure there are exceptions. You talked about China, which is another country that we cited in our written submission. We are very concerned about the trajectory of British policy towards China, which, seen from the outside, is increasingly being set by the Treasury and not by the Foreign Office; it is very focused on business. Of course, we had the state visit from President Xi at the end of 2015, and again human rights concerns were barely mentioned—they certainly were not mentioned publicly, despite an absolutely relentless crackdown on dissent in China. Xi came to power three years ago supposedly as a reformer, but our evidence at Human Rights Watch from watching China very closely is that there has been a dramatic deterioration in respect for human rights in China. That does not appear to be reflected in British policy, which, as you say, is increasingly about trade—talking up the trade and business opportunities and downplaying the human rights concerns, which are very real and very substantial in China.

Q18 Ann Clwyd: What do you think the FCO should do so that stakeholders and the electorate are better able to assess its performance on human rights and to hold it to account?

David Mepham: Maybe you were going to come to this in a follow-up question, but perhaps I should raise it now, Ann, because you have raised a very important issue. The Foreign Office has been producing an annual report on human rights for almost 20 years now, under successive Governments. There is a plan to produce an annual report on human rights this year—I think it is due to come out in a couple of months' time, in April—but what we

hear is that the new version of the FCO's human rights report will be dramatically shorter than previous ones. The phrase I have heard is a quarter of the length, which worries me and other human rights organisations a great deal.

You were a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the previous Parliament, Ann, so you know that the report has been an important element of accountability. You as parliamentarians could look at what the Foreign Office says they are trying to do on human rights and question them about it. If you dramatically scale back the kind of information and analysis provided to parliamentarians, the public and organisations such as ours, it weakens the accountability and the capacity of people outside Government to hold them to account. I am worried about what the new version of the human rights report is going to look like and how short it is going to be. It may be quite light on analysis of some very important countries.

There are other ways, such as the reporting that goes on online. The Foreign Office has talked about doing that twice a year now, not quarterly, which was the case in the past. Sometimes human rights situations around the world move very quickly. Burundi would be a case in point: things are changing dramatically from month to month. It is important for parliamentarians to have a sense of what the Foreign Office is doing about these issues and for that to be regularly updated. If it is done less frequently, it is harder to hold them to account for their policy.

Q19 Ann Clwyd: Do you think that in the change in the language from “Countries of Concern” to “Human Rights Priority Countries” and the shift of emphasis, the Foreign Office is trying to make the human rights agenda less contentious?

David Mepham: Possibly. To be honest, I am not so worried about the change in the title—I am quite relaxed about that. My worry would be about whether we are going to continue to see some very important countries excluded from that category. We have already discussed it briefly, but we are very concerned about the fact that Egypt is not regarded as either a country of concern or a priority country. Given the gravity of the human rights crisis in Egypt, it is frankly astonishing that it was not included in the “Countries of Concern” section in last year's FCO annual report. On any objective basis, looking at what is going on there—the mass death sentences, the detentions, the mass killings that took place in 2013, the clampdown on civil society and journalists—Egypt would have to be in there. Yet clearly for political reasons—that is the only conclusion one can draw—they have taken Egypt out because it is a bit embarrassing: “We don't want to upset the Egyptians so let's take them out.” That is worrying.

You know that we have previously expressed concerns about the exclusion of countries such as Bahrain, Ethiopia and Rwanda—again, countries that I think on objective grounds could well be included in this category, but that have been excluded because it is not politically helpful, as they might perceive it, to include them. I suggest that the Committee pushes the Minister very hard on what the criteria for inclusion and exclusion are. How can a country like Egypt not be included, given what is going on there?

Q20 Mr Hendrick: I want to follow up on the previous question. I am sure the Foreign Office would say that a thinner but much more focused human rights report is of greater value. In the past they have produced fairly big, thick, comprehensive reports that touched on as many countries as possible, but perhaps none in the depth that some people would have

wanted; there was almost a scattergun approach to the whole thing. I agree with you that the omission of Egypt is important and that country should not have been overlooked, but do you not think it is better for the Foreign Office to focus on what they used to call “Countries of Concern”, for obvious reasons, rather than try to do too much and do it badly?

David Mepham: They have said that the new report that comes out in April will have a “Countries of Concern” section, although they are now going to call them “Priority Countries”, as Ann Clwyd was just saying. The section will still exist, but if the overall report is a quarter of the length of previous ones, what is going to be said about Saudi Arabia and Egypt? That is assuming that Egypt is even included. I think it is unlikely to be included, which is a big concern of ours, but take a country like Saudi Arabia or China: is there going to be one paragraph of analysis about what is going on in those countries?

You can always have an argument about the length and the focus, but it strikes me that a Committee such as yours and organisations such as ours would like to see more detail, not less, and I am worried that a much shorter report is going to provide a limited basis for parliamentarians, NGOs and journalists to cross-examine the Government on what they are doing about human rights abuses in the many countries around the world where those abuses are egregious and widespread. You need sufficient analysis and material properly to hold them to account, and that is the worry about a much shorter report.

Q21 Chair: But if that analysis exists elsewhere—in, say, country files held by the Foreign Office—a shorter, more focused report on human rights should be rather more user-friendly for everyone except human rights specialists such as yourself and organisations that have the capacity to cover the globe. Isn’t it better for us to focus on areas where we can make a real difference?

David Mepham: If I heard you correctly, you referred to country files. The critical question is: is this material public? The country files would not necessarily be public, and for there to be transparency and accountability around foreign policy and the human rights dimensions of foreign policy, that material has to be in the public domain, or as much of it as possible—perhaps there are some things that it is not feasible to put in the public domain. That is the worry.

Let’s see what happens in April. Perhaps they will produce a report that pushes every button and we are all very satisfied with it and think that it gives us sufficient material. I do think, though, that a dramatically reduced report in terms of length does the raise the concern that there will be much less material and analysis being shared with the public and with parliamentarians that allows us to hold them to account.

Q22 Chair: Have you identified any difference between how the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office address this issue, and are there any lessons for the FCO in how DFID deals with it?

David Mepham: DFID releases an annual report, as does the Foreign Office. I am not aware that DFID produces any kind of country analysis in the public domain that goes through what they are doing in Rwanda, in Nigeria, and so on. I am not aware of that. Perhaps it does, but I haven’t seen it.

Chair: I think there is a development tracker—you can follow their programmes rather more easily than you can follow the work of the Foreign Office—but we will put those points to the Minister when she comes to address us tomorrow.

David, thank you very much indeed for giving us evidence from across the pond. We are very grateful.

David Mepham: Thank you very much.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Kate Allen**, Director of Amnesty International UK, gave evidence.

Q23 Chair: Thank you very much indeed for joining us. Would you like to formally identify yourself for the record?

Kate Allen: Thank you. My name is Kate Allen and I am Director of Amnesty International in the UK.

Chair: Thank you very much for your written evidence. I think that you had the opportunity to hear David Mepham. What is your view on whether or not the Government have deprioritised human rights?

Kate Allen: I think that when we hear Sir Simon McDonald actually saying that, there are real concerns. Over the past year or so, our concerns about the priority of human rights have become more marked. One of the things I would want to add to the areas that David talked about is that if you look back at some of the areas that we have worked on together in my time at Amnesty—civil society, human rights organisations and the FCO—you see that over several years we have had some brilliant co-operation around issues and campaigns such as the arms trade treaty, the preventing sexual violence initiative and support for human rights defenders in Afghanistan. I pick out those three as key areas where in the last three years, civil society, human rights organisations and Amnesty International's 600,000 members, supporters and activists have worked together, either by getting behind a Government initiative, such as preventing sexual violence, or by persuading Government to get behind one of our campaigns, and we have seen the kind of impact that we can have in this country when we make those connections. I do not see where the next connection is at the moment in terms of what we could jointly pursue for good in terms of human rights in the world. That would be my worry about where things are going: I cannot see where the progress is and where we could work together to make things happen.

I would also say that in some areas—for example, the arms trade treaty, which is something that Amnesty fought for over a 20-year period, so it is enormously close to our hearts to see how it is implemented—previous Governments have championed it. The last Government, with William Hague and Alistair Burt, were one of the first Governments to bring that treaty into operation, but at the moment, we are seeing our Government not implementing it—in fact, worse than not implementing it, they are breaking that treaty. I refer to arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which is involved in Yemen. We have a legal opinion, which we have shared with the Government, which says that they are breaking domestic and EU law

and the arms trade treaty, and we have not yet had a response on that. I feel like some of those key issues on which we have made really significant moves forward together are going backwards.

Q24 Chair: What is your view on the shift to three key themes of work? Is the impact likely to be adverse? I think the Foreign Office's case is that it will make the business of human rights everybody's business.

Kate Allen: A bit like David, I think that whether it is 6+2 or 3, the key thing is that we are absolutely clear what sits under each of those headings. One advantage of the previous 6+2 is that the name said it all: the death penalty, freedom of expression, women's human rights and so on. What we have now is three headings, and I am not sure what sits under those. It is not clear to me that that is clear across the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and that there are clear communications about torture and the death penalty—those are the issues I would highlight. Very significant work was undertaken by the FCO on the torture strategy. We would like to see that happen, and I am not sure where it is happening, or what resources are going into that; likewise with the death penalty.

We have seen the external panels abandoned that brought together expertise and the FCO to take those issues forward, so there are concerns, at the least. What human rights objectives are the Government pursuing under each of those three headings? Can you find the issue that you are passionate about under those three headings or not? Maybe it is a question of time, but at the moment I would say it is quite difficult to see.

Q25 Chair: You have recommended that all UK missions should have a dedicated human rights adviser. How do you envisage that working? Who would they be? Where would they be drawn from? Would Foreign Office staff take up that role, or would someone external come in to undertake that role, and who would pay for them?

Kate Allen: No, we see them very much as Foreign Office staff, an integral part of that mission—not an add-on, but absolutely a part of that team, which has the remit of taking the Government's human rights priorities and applying them to that country, making relationship and contacts with human rights defenders in that country, observing trials, being out there seeing exactly what is happening, looking for opportunities to bring British Government influence to bear and bringing that back to the rest of the mission. It is not that that is the only place that human rights resides, but it is a focal point within a mission to provide the expertise and support to do more and do better.

Q26 Chair: Doesn't that already exist? Doesn't someone in each mission have the responsibility for human rights? Obviously, it depends on the size of the mission as to how much bandwidth that issue takes up. If there are only three Foreign Office diplomats in a mission, it is quite difficult to have one of them entirely devoted to human rights.

Kate Allen: I think the bandwidth is the key issue, isn't it? If you look across missions that have more than a staff of three—where the UK has substantial resources placed—where do human rights reside and where is that bandwidth? From our point of view, having a dedicated resource would mean that you had it at the forefront—pushing, looking for opportunities, being proactive and making sure that British Government influence was being used as creatively and as well as possible.

Q27 Chair: What advice do you have for the Committee on how we should hold the Government to account on human rights? I realise that it is difficult to say before they produce their new human rights report, but assuming it is a much more slimmed down version of the former accountability document, what would your advice to us be about how to hold the Government to account on human rights for the rest of this Parliament?

Kate Allen: As you say, we will see the new report before too long and I think it will be good to have that conversation then, seeing exactly what it looks like. For us at Amnesty, the report is a crucial moment in the year and in the calendar. It is not just the report; it is the fact that attention is paid to it, that this Committee scrutinises it, that you ask Amnesty and others what we think of it, and that there is a debate and a conversation about it. So I look forward to being able—I hope—to talk to you about that report once we have seen it.

The clarity of the objectives is the key. We go back to the three new objectives and what the Government's intention is under each of those in terms of the human rights progress that they wish to see. I would also say, as David from Human Rights Watch said, that the pressure where trade and human rights come into conflict is a point that is key for us. I would say that with the UK selling arms to Saudi Arabia at the moment and when we see what the UN panel is saying about the situation in Yemen—the targeting of civilians and the human rights abuses that are taking place—those issues absolutely need to be debated. I think that sometimes with countries like Saudi Arabia, there is a different standard in terms of human rights application from the British Government, and that is something we would like to see the end of.

Q28 Yasmin Qureshi: I asked David about whether the Foreign Office is sufficiently resourced to have a meaningful impact in the three areas it has identified as the ones it wants to look at, also bearing in mind that there have generally been cuts to Foreign Office funding. What do you think, Kate?

Kate Allen: We are very much aware that the cuts to the Foreign Office this time round were not as deep as had been expected, but we must remember that there were cuts in 2010 and 2013. That there are not dedicated resources within the human rights and democracy department for some of the key issues that we are concerned about worries us—whether enough resources are being placed there to achieve that impact. There are extraordinarily dedicated civil servants in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office who are taking up these issues and who want to pursue them, so it is not about anything other than the level of resources. We would like to see that extended—we would always want to see that extended.

Q29 Yasmin Qureshi: Obviously, as you said, resources are perhaps not necessarily the priority issue. Do you think it is more linked with what we have heard, namely that the political will—that is, at ministerial level—to deal with human rights issues, or deprioritise them, is what affects whether they can even look at these three issues that they themselves have identified as important? Do you agree that there seems to be less of that political will now than there used to be?

Kate Allen: I agree. It was disappointing on Human Rights Day to have the Foreign Secretary talk about megaphone diplomacy and quiet diplomacy. We at Amnesty are well aware of the different uses of both of those. Human Rights Day is an occasion where we

could have hoped for something that set out a vision and an opportunity for human rights to be lauded and described in different ways. We felt we were being a bit hit over the head and told, “Stop shouting at us.” Of course, one of the things that happens in this country is that we disagree at times, but we also agree, and we try to be sensible about that and are not always using a megaphone.

It feels like some of these key opportunities in the year to really champion human rights are being squandered. As I said earlier, the fact that we have been used to having some really ambitious joint areas that we work on—we have PSVI, which is still being implemented, but we do not have its successor on the horizon. That means there may well be a deprioritisation of this as an issue.

Q30 Yasmin Qureshi: Some people are cynical and say that this depends on the country in question and whether we want to have a good trade deal with it. Trade deals and investment seem to be the priority, and we do not really pay attention to human rights issues in countries that we want on our side strategically or want to work with, and we are more concerned about human rights in countries that we do not have financial or other strategic interests in.

Kate Allen: I would agree with you, but I would also say that this is not new. It has gone on for a long time. Amnesty would say that if you are talking about China, Egypt or Saudi Arabia, where there are strong security and prosperity trade issues, to completely leave human rights off the agenda is to do a disservice to both prosperity and security. For us, human rights is an essential part of that.

For example, we saw the Chancellor in China not talking about human rights at a time when over 200 lawyers had been arrested; when he was in Xinjiang province and when Amnesty were campaigning for an economist who had been imprisoned—as far as we are aware, there was no conversation about that. It feels to us that human rights is not at the centre of that. That is why we would say there should not only be a human rights adviser in each UK mission but a human rights adviser on these big trade delegations, so that human rights can be part of that conversation and not something that is swept to one side.

Q31 Andrew Rosindell: What is your view of the shift in language away from “Countries of Concern” to “Human Rights Priority Countries”?

Kate Allen: Personally, I like “Countries of Concern”, as it shows that there is a concern and worry about what is happening there. But again, let’s see what the new human rights report that the Government produces looks like and see how that definition works out.

Q32 Chair: What is your assessment of the Magna Carta Fund as a means of influencing human rights overseas? It appears to have doubled, if one is measuring the Office’s commitment to human rights in financial terms.

Kate Allen: We very much welcome the increase in the size of the fund. Amnesty has not made any applications for the fund, but in the past colleagues of mine have been advisers to the fund in terms of the uses to which its predecessor was put. We are very supportive of that fund. We think it is a really good opportunity to support some creative and very important work around the world. The only thing we would highlight is that smaller, community-based organisations, particularly those outside capital cities, which do not have

much experience of applying for funds, will need additional support to be able to apply effectively. There are Governments with funds that do this well, such as the Dutch, and there may be things that can be learned from them. The only thing we would pull out is making sure that it isn't just the big NGOs based in capital cities that have access.

Q33 Chair: How do we deal with, say, Russian human rights NGOs, for whom taking foreign money is likely to be seen as treasonable?

Kate Allen: Yes, it is very difficult. Amnesty has an office in Moscow, and I understand all too well what the difficulties are. Some of the ways in which the embassy in Moscow has reached out to NGOs have been very good. There is a sense of interest in what is happening to NGOs, which is very good, and the embassy is raising these issues with the Russian authorities. There are now well over 100 NGOs on the foreign agents list. We have seen that happen to NGOs working on the way in which elections are conducted. LGBTI organisations have been absolutely targeted, as have other human rights organisations. Work from the embassy and the Government to raise this with the Russian authorities is the way to take it forward.

Q34 Chair: On the willingness of missions overseas to engage with human rights NGOs locally, have you seen any change in the behaviour and policy of our overseas missions that would support to any extent your point about a reduction in ministerial priority around these issues? What is actually happening on the ground? Are our missions just as committed as they were before? Is the actuality of what is happening on the ground pretty much the same as it has been in previous years?

Kate Allen: That is a very wide question. I would need to think about whether the change of priority is having any effect. I think that if those at the top of the Foreign Office are not championing human rights, it will be of concern.

Q35 Chair: That is why I am asking whether you have identified any change in, for example, the willingness of our mission in Moscow to engage with human rights NGOs in Russia, or indeed anywhere else in the world where there has been a change; or is there in fact a commitment to promote human rights throughout the Foreign Office? I think the Minister's point is that this is actually about outputs, not about how it is recorded in an annual compendium; it is actually about what happens on the ground, and that on the ground missions are still committed to supporting NGOs, particularly where it is difficult.

Kate Allen: I am sure that great work is happening.

Chair: I'm really asking whether you have seen any change.

Kate Allen: No, I can't say that I have.

Q36 Mr Hendrick: Clearly, as a lobbying organisation lobbying for huge improvements on human rights, it is your job to highlight where you think the Government should be doing more and where you think it is not doing a particularly good job. I totally agree with you on Russia. When I visited Russia, I met some of the human rights groups that are doing very good work under extreme pressure, given the changes to the law—the Russian authorities are doing their best to outlaw the activities of many lobbying organisations. Put yourself in the

position of, say, one of our Foreign Ministers. If the Government took a view like yours, and put human rights at the top of the agenda—admittedly, I do not think it is high enough up the agenda—to the detriment of everything else, do you not think that to some extent the Government's other priorities would take a beating? That could put our relations with many of those countries, which may be improving their human rights even though they are not reaching the standards that we would like, in danger of becoming more aggressive instead of becoming more positive.

Kate Allen: I am not sure that pursuing human rights is ever to the detriment of progress in a country. Take Saudi Arabia—a country where recently 47 people were executed in one day, where is no freedom of speech and where we are campaigning for individuals such as Raif Badawi, who was given a 10-year prison sentence and has been lashed 50 times simply for a very reasonable blog that he wrote. Some women in Saudi Arabia have a vote in local elections, but there is no equality for women in the workplace and in family life; in everything else, they are discriminated against hugely. I do not see where it could be to the detriment of those human rights—

Q37 Mr Hendrick: In Saudi Arabia, I totally agree with you, so list as many examples and instances as you like, but not every country is the same, and my question is whether it might be more sensible for Ministers to calibrate their response to the specific concerns about a specific country. The example of Saudi Arabia is clear. With Egypt, it is scandalous that the actions of the Egyptian Government are overlooked by the Foreign Office in terms of producing a human rights report.

One example you mentioned is China. I regularly visit China and, as Peter mentioned previously, President Xi Jinping is called a reformist. China's move away from the one-child policy is a step forward. The reform that is talked about a great deal relates in particular to corruption, which is a huge problem and leads to many human rights abuses. We know what is happening in Xinjiang, and to many people in the outside world Xinjiang looks like a problem of human rights, but to many Chinese people living in Xinjiang, it is a terrorist problem. Obviously a country the size of China, which is probably the size of two continents, has serious internal security problems, and unlike modern western democracies like us, they would not necessarily have the same development and sophistication to be able to deal with it in the way that we would want. All I am asking is whether there is a case for calibrating our attitudes to human rights, depending on the country we are dealing with.

Kate Allen: I am not sure that I would use the word “calibrating”. The diplomats in the FCO have huge experience of how to raise these issues.

Q38 Mr Hendrick: I am talking about the Ministers. The criticism from Mr Mepham and probably for the most part from you is that civil servants are excellent and our Foreign Office people are great. I am talking about the job that Ministers have to do when they go out to these countries.

Kate Allen: And my view and the view of Amnesty International is that in the right way in each of those places that Ministers go to, human rights should be firmly on the agenda. Sometimes that might be a private conversation and sometimes it might be in public; sometimes it might be quite critical and sometimes it might be encouraging, but it should take place. We would say that in such countries as China, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, either we are

not seeing it take place or we are not seeing any results from private diplomacy. You can only be told that the private diplomacy is taking place and having an effect for so long before the demand to show what some of that effect is comes into operation.

Q39 Mr Hendrick: I would make a distinction there, and that is what I meant by calibration. Attacking a country on its human rights record is not the same as being a critical friend, and that differentiation should be made.

Kate Allen: I agree, but I do not think that being a critical friend when the abuses are so extreme is the appropriate approach.

Mr Hendrick: On Saudi Arabia, I would agree with you.

Yasmin Qureshi: There are other countries as well. You always concentrate on Saudi Arabia.

Chair: Let's ask the questions, rather than conduct a debate.

Q40 Ann Clwyd: The FCO's annual report contained three paragraphs—in a 192-page report—on its monitoring and evaluation work. Is it not just a joke when the term “monitoring” is used? Does it really happen in practice? When we ask about the use of arms, for example, in countries that we are exporting to and we ask for a monitoring report on whether those arms have been used in certain circumstances, we very rarely get what I would call comprehensive replies. I would suggest the monitoring and evaluation is a bit of a joke.

Kate Allen: If you go back to the conversation that we were having about the three new priorities, for me, it is essential that the human rights objectives under each of those are articulated and communicated really clearly, so that we know exactly what the Government are setting out to do. In that way, the monitoring and evaluation is applied towards an objective rather than simply sitting in a vacuum, and it would then have more meaning. If an objective was to implement the arms trade treaty, we would absolutely be having a conversation at the publication of the next annual report about whether that objective was met or not, and I would be sat here telling you that our view as Amnesty, given what is happening in Yemen, would be that it is being completely flouted. But it seems to me that what is lacking at the moment are clear objectives under those three priorities.

Q41 Ann Clwyd: Comparing what the Foreign Office does on evaluation with, for example, what is done by the Department for International Development, my view is that DFID has a much more comprehensive evaluation process in place than the Foreign Office does.

Kate Allen: I am not that closely aware of DFID. I have heard that it has very effective evaluation and I am sure that the Departments could learn from each other.

Q42 Ann Clwyd: I only know because I was once a member of that Committee. The evaluation reports on projects, for example, and whether policies were working were pretty thorough compared with, as I described, a few paragraphs in the annual report from the Foreign Office. We can also compare what happens in other countries, although I don't know if you go with those comparisons. You are asking for monitoring. Suppose a country has sold arms somewhere and there is a suspicion that they are not being used as they were supposed to be used. There are other countries that take monitoring much more seriously.

Kate Allen: I agree.

Q43 Ann Clwyd: The other thing I would suggest is that in the countries that we have been very heavily involved in, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, our continuing policies there really are questionable, as is the effectiveness of those policies. I think just a few paragraphs in the annual report are not sufficient.

Kate Allen: If you look back to some of the progress that has been made, there was the adoption in Afghanistan of the EU guidelines on human rights defenders, with particular support for women human rights defenders. I think that that was agreed over a year ago. I would very much like to know how that has been implemented and what advantage human rights defenders now feel from those guidelines and the increased sense of security given by them for the work they are doing. By pulling out particular projects, making sure that they are followed through and understanding where the progress is, we can build future progress.

Q44 Chair: Some of the evidence we have taken, particularly from some LGBT human rights organisations, has been quite positive about the change that the Foreign Office is undertaking. They think it will give them and the Office more rather than less scope, and support moving away from the comprehensive annual report on human rights, the critique of which is that it has become rather formulaic, one year following the next. It has become a document that is perhaps of some use to Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, but in terms of highlighting current issues of concern and getting a new, annual focus on them, the rather less prescriptive and formulaic approach, which we are yet to see in action, might be an improvement. What are your thoughts on the people who see the change as positive?

Kate Allen: The only thing I would say about the human rights report is that I think it is much more than “of use to Amnesty and Human Rights Watch”. It really is a report that shows the accountability of the UK Government over this issue. We felt like we were hanging on to it with our fingernails at some points during the last year, so I am really glad that it is still there because of that moment and because of the conversation that I hope we will have in a few months’ time. I think it is really important.

Shaking things up is good, too and in April we will see whether we think that shake-up is one that still shows accountability that we can all—not just human rights organisations—talk about. At the launches of some previous reports, the media and everyone else were really interested in what Government Ministers were saying and who was on the panel presenting the report; there was a real sense of occasion. Some of that has drifted, so what goes around the report is also important.

The thing I would say about the 6+2 and the lack of LGBTI among them, the head of the human rights and democracy department said that that was a bit of a hierarchy of norms. It would not be a bad hierarchy if you added LGBTI to it. Then there would be a clear sense of what is being pursued. I am repeating myself, but again that is what is lacking at the moment in the current three priorities. It can be put right, but there needs to be a real sense of what the Government’s objectives are.

Q45 Chair: How important is public debate and public concern about being able to engage people, and therefore the media, whose attention span is always limited and spotlighted? Are

we not likely to be a bit more effective with more of an issue by issue, country by country and perhaps individual by individual focus on progress, or the lack of it, around individuals, countries and causes' rights, rather than a much more comprehensive response that then gets lost in the background? Producing highlights might have the capacity to achieve ministerial focus and public focus.

Kate Allen: Again, we will see when we get the new human rights report and see what the changes are, but I do think it has been a really important report and I think that the attention that it has had in previous years has been important. I think that important debates have come out of that: the UK's approach to Saudi in terms of torture and I remember in the past some areas have been really highlighted and which the Government has taken to heart. That has been the role of human rights organisations, this Committee and the media, making clear and having a discussion. That is important, and I hope that we have that around the next report, however long or short it is, and that we can have a conversation about how effective we think it is once we see the thing.

Chair: Okay. If my colleagues have no further questions, Kate, thank you very much indeed.