

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Future of Britain's Diplomatic Relationship with Europe, HC 514

Tuesday 28 November 2017

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Ian Austin; Chris Bryant; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Ms Nusrat Ghani; Ian Murray; Andrew Rosindell; Royston Smith; Nadhim Zahawi.

Questions 133-258

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Sir Alan Duncan KCMG MP, Minister of State for Europe and the Americas, Mark Gooding, Assistant Director Europe – North, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Caroline Wilson, Europe Director, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon. Sir Alan Duncan KCMG MP, Mark Gooding and Caroline Wilson.

Chair: Welcome, Sir Alan. Thank you very much for coming to the Committee this afternoon. Welcome, Caroline Wilson and Mark Gooding. Very good of you all to come. You know the format, perhaps we will start off straightaway.

Q133 **Chris Bryant:** Sir Alan, you have responsibility for Russia. The Government have had long-standing concerns about Russian policy, for example in Ukraine, Crimea and so on. We have managed regularly to come back from European Council meetings saying how wonderful it is that we have got the whole of the EU to sign up to sanctions. How do you expect, or hope, to maintain that degree of securing European-wide agreement to, essentially, our foreign policy objectives in relation to, for instance, Russia after Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: First of all, the mechanisms for applying sanctions will be put in place—I will come to that in a minute. I sense that your question is really directed at whether, in the absence of us having influence directly around the table, we will get the same sort of unity. I obviously hope we will. I think that the effort we are making for defence and security in eastern Europe more generally is having a very significant impact. That is not necessarily because we are part of the EU; it is because we are the United Kingdom, a significant economy, part of NATO and a country whose interest in the region and sense of duty to it have always been very solid. I am absolutely sure that that will continue. Obviously we hope that the 27 will continue to be persuaded that the sort of policy we have commonly been adopting on the likes of Ukraine will continue.

Of course, if you look at some of the closer eastern European countries, there is a very close affinity with countries in the EU, and they will not want to split away from their interests, I would like to think. I hope that the UK will continue to be a very significant actor—that is why we have got a forward deployment force in Estonia, for instance—and that, by our example and persuasion, we will continue to have a strong and broadly united European view on such important issues.

Q134 **Chris Bryant:** But if we are not in the room—I will come back to that in a moment—and the EU decides, for example, to abandon sanctions in relations with Russia, which without us at the table in the past would have been the result on several occasions, will we still keep sanctions? For that matter, if the EU decides to impose sanctions, will we just end up doing exactly the same sanctions?

Sir Alan Duncan: The answer to both of the two questions that you ask is that we will have flexibility in, because what we will do—the process has



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already started in the House of Lords, because that is where the Bill has been introduced—is to establish our own autonomous sanctions regime. We have to do that as we leave the EU because at the moment we apply sanctions as part of the EU but, within that, it also fulfils our legal obligation to implement UN sanctions. So if we are not to be a member of the EU, we will need the power to implement UN sanctions at the very least. That is what the sanctions Bill will equip us to do. I will be in charge of it coming through Commons when it reaches us in the new year. It will also allow us to work in harness or parallel with, or replicating, the EU, should we so choose—I forecast that by and large we will—or we can do things on our own, slightly differently or in addition to anything that the EU may or may not do. We will have an autonomous sanctions regime that will fulfil our obligations to the UN but also empower us as a sovereign country to work as we see fit with the EU or others across the world.

Q135 Chris Bryant: On the whole, the wider a sanctions regime is shared, in particular by big countries such as ourselves, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland and so on, the more effective it is likely to be. I think you would agree with that proposition.

Sir Alan Duncan: Sure. A collective endeavour is better than scattergun individual ones. I think that is self-evident—

Q136 Chris Bryant: A good reason for staying in the European Union! This is the question I want to ask about being in the room: you said at the beginning, “If we are not sitting in the room.” So does that mean you are ruling out sitting in the room?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think it was you who said, “If we are not sitting in the room,” but let’s not quibble. I think structures like that have yet to be determined. There is always an advantage, on something like sanctions, to be sitting around the table together, but at this stage—of both the EU negotiations and your own inquiry as a Committee—we cannot state categorically which rooms we are going to be in. That takes us, really, to the fundamental question of what we think the foreign policy structures might be once we have left the EU. There is, if you like, a spectrum of possibility. We have the closest imaginable working relationship with the United States, but we do not have formal structures within which we operate. We have a fantastic foundation of trust that makes co-operation almost assumed—if you read Kissinger’s “White House Years”, he describes the basis of assumed trust on which we work. At the moment within the EU we have some highly structured ways of working—in Committees, the Foreign Affairs Council, the General Affairs Council or whatever you want to point out as such a structure. We could have, if you like, a Brussels model, where it is accepted that for certain purposes we are always at the table, we could have a Washington model, where it just works—or perhaps doesn’t, but we hope it does—or we could have something in between. We cannot stay at this stage.

Q137 Chris Bryant: But with America isn’t the key determinant, in relation to defence, NATO? There are major policy objectives that we want to pursue in Europe—historically, that would have included Bosnia, where we were



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part of EUFOR and Atalanta and Althea, which were two operations where we took the lead—but if we were not in the room, not even as an observer, isn't it going to be much more difficult for us to participate effectively?

Sir Alan Duncan: In respect of existing structures, if we are not in the room with them, then I think it is undeniable that what you say is likely to be true, but if other structures arise then the detriment that I can sense you see is there would obviously be mitigated.

Q138 **Chris Bryant:** So just another structure, then?

Sir Alan Duncan: Again, it is a bit early to say that. For instance, on the Balkans, we all co-operate. I have just been to the EU Eastern Partnership, on Friday. Admittedly, that is the EU-plus-something, but it is an example of a structure that works for the region that is not just the EU, so any kind of co-operation between countries is possible with imagination and a common purpose.

Q139 **Chair:** May I intervene briefly? The PUS said he would wish us to be consulted automatically. Does that not suggest more of the structured, Brussels end of the spectrum than the US end?

Sir Alan Duncan: Could do. I would like to think that people will want to consult us, because of our significance as a large and strong country. For instance, the City is crucial to the implementation of the financial dimension of any sanctions in particular. Therefore, an effective sanctions regime without including the City of London would be very much weaker, I would have thought.

Q140 **Stephen Gethins:** Minister, you mentioned the western Balkans as an obvious area where the UK co-operates with our European and other partners. A big carrot for the western Balkan nations is obviously EU membership. What impact do you think that the UK stepping outside the European Union will have on our relationship with our western Balkan partners? What are they telling you about that?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, you're right: it is foremost in their long-term strategic ambitions. I suppose that I spent the last year going to many of these meetings, having to address the paradox, under which they wish to join and we have chosen to leave. My main message, consistently throughout that period, has been one of reassurance: that because we are leaving the EU does not mean that we are in any way retreating from our engagement in the defence, security and broader interests of, in particular, eastern Europe—and we are not in any way retreating. If anything, we have increased our engagement bilaterally and collectively in that region. I have given absolutely continuous, loud and, I have to say, well-received and well-understood reassurances that we are not going to shrink and somehow turn our back on them.

Q141 **Stephen Gethins:** Do you think it lessens our influence?

Sir Alan Duncan: I can see a way in which it need not, and that if we engage as assertively and purposefully as I think we are even now, it need not do so. I can of course see the dangers that it might—I think any



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sensible person can—but I do not necessarily think that it will; although I defer to the official, of course.

Caroline Wilson: We are hosting the western Balkans summit next year, which is an incredibly important indication of our ongoing commitment to the region. We are doing that very much in consultation with our EU partners. Indeed, they are happy that we are doing it.

If I may briefly return to the points about being in the room or out of the room, of course there is so much upstream critical analysis that we need to do before you reach those decisions in the room. I am sure you will be very familiar with the contents of the Government's paper on foreign policy, defence and development—

Q142 **Chris Bryant:** Yes, and that's what led me to ask the question, because it has 55 pages saying why it's all going to be terrible, and then one clause in which it seems to suggest that maybe we should think about observer status.

Caroline Wilson: There are a number of suggestions in there, including data exchange and expert exchanges, which will help to establish the common underpinning for decisions, even if we are not in the room. There are lots of different ways of influencing, including bilaterally and with groups of different countries.

Q143 **Nadhim Zahawi:** Sir Alan, Caroline and Mark, welcome. When did the Government decide to publish the partnership paper?

Sir Alan Duncan: When? I have no idea. Just before it did, I suppose. I don't know.

Caroline Wilson: It is part of a series of papers that I believe were published over the summer. As for when the precise decision was taken to publish, I am not entirely sure.

Q144 **Nadhim Zahawi:** Why did the Government publish the plan if, as the Foreign Secretary told us on 1 November, the Cabinet has not agreed a position on whether or not the UK should participate in the FAC or the PSC?

Sir Alan Duncan: I suppose it's laying out the analysis of the lie of the land as we enter continuing negotiations with the EU, on which you cannot publish the total conclusions before you have gone through the process. As you can see, we are trying to get to phase two now.

Nadhim Zahawi: You are moving forward tentatively.

Sir Alan Duncan: Inching forward.

Q145 **Nadhim Zahawi:** So will the Government publish an update once the Cabinet has a settled view on this?

Sir Alan Duncan: I'm not sure it's whether the Cabinet has a view so much as where the negotiations get to, if I can put it that way. In a way, this entire inquiry is predicated to a very large extent on what now



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happens in the negotiations between the UK and the EU. I suggest that the extent to which they get traction and head in one direction or another over time will determine what might follow, in terms of the foreign policy structures within which we are going to work in the future.

Q146 **Nadhim Zahawi:** I get that. It is clearly an issue that the negotiations are fluid—that is what I am getting from you, Minister—but what I am trying to establish for our inquiry is what the Government would have done on phase two if we had got to an agreement in October.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that what I am suggesting is that you are asking for a picture of certainty before we are in a position, because of the state of negotiations, to offer you that.

Q147 **Chair:** Surely one of the elements we are hoping for is some idea of what the Government is aiming for. I appreciate that there is a range of options, and I certainly understand that you cannot now promise something that the EU27 may or may not agree to, but there must be something that the Government is aiming towards—an aspiration that it has.

Nadhim Zahawi: When you answer that question, could you say where you think you are at? If zero means we are nowhere and 10 means we are very close to a structure that looks agreeable, where are we on that scale?

Sir Alan Duncan: I understand the intellectual basis of your questions, as it were, but as I endeavoured to explain ahead of this witness session, I am not actually the Minister involved in these Brexit negotiations; I do the broader diplomacy with the 77 countries for which I am responsible. I do not want to be unhelpful, but you are sort of firing questions at a Minister who is not directly responsible for the areas you are asking about.

Q148 **Chair:** I do understand that, Minister, but you are the Minister responsible for Europe, so D-day plus one will be in your portfolio. There must surely be work going on in the Foreign Office's European department on how it sees the future relationship with the EU27. We are looking at that area, rather than the detail of the Brexit talks. As Europe Minister, as you rightly say, you are also flying around 27 other capitals and seeing other Europe Ministers, so you must have a feel from them.

Sir Alan Duncan: It's almost true to say that my main focus is on all these bilateral relations while others are doing the Brexit detail. Again, I do not mean to give an unhelpful answer, but that is the honest truth. In terms of dealing with our posts abroad and with all the extensive bilateral issues that are part of the daily life of a Foreign Minister, there is a hell of a lot going on that will continue and that has to continue, irrespective of the arrangements we reach or fail to reach with the EU. There is a lot of counter-terrorist stuff within migration; we have visa posts in our buildings; we are trying through all our embassies to have as closely woven a cross-Whitehall approach as we possibly can. All of that kind of thing is going on. That daily diet of Foreign Office work is continuing irrespective of what happens with the state of the Brexit negotiations.



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Caroline Wilson: It is true, as the Chair has said, that we are giving a lot of thought in the Foreign Office to the future arrangements. As the Minister said, formally, no negotiations are yet ongoing on the future of our foreign policy and defence co-operation, but we have had initial informal contacts—it is only natural we would do so—on the overall shape. I can say that there is a huge desire and enthusiasm on the part of the majority of, if not all, member states to continue close co-operation with the United Kingdom on foreign policy, defence, security and development issues. The will is certainly there, but as for the way, it is fair to say that that is something nobody can prejudge at this stage because, as the Minister said, it is very much subject to negotiations. Some member states take a more doctrinaire approach to this; others are very open to different ways of doing this, and as the Minister says, we have to reflect that in our ultimate approach when the negotiations on this point start.

Q149 **Chair:** Ms Wilson, am I right in saying the FCO has the lead on this area of the DExEU negotiations—on CFSP/CSDP?

Caroline Wilson: We of course lead on those issues. Formally, there are no negotiations yet, but that is correct—foreign policy is what the Foreign Office does.

Sir Alan Duncan: In perpetuity.

Q150 **Nadhim Zahawi:** I want to come back on this point, Minister. In your thinking—Caroline may want to respond to this—are we closer to a design that will be formal and codified or a much more informal relationship for the future?

Sir Alan Duncan: The CFSP is slightly apart from the exact treaty structure of the EU—Caroline would like to explain—so there is a bit of flexibility here.

Caroline Wilson: If you will pardon me, I am not going to be drawn at this stage on possible formal relationships or codifying them. As I say, what we are clear on is the desire to collaborate. As for formal structures, we are not at that stage yet. We need to talk to our partners to establish what will work best. Sorry!

Q151 **Nadhim Zahawi:** There is a lot of work that needs to be done between now and 2019.

Sir Alan Duncan: Oh yeah.

Q152 **Mike Gapes:** Ms Wilson, you said, “Foreign policy is what the Foreign Office does”, almost as an aside; but PESCO and these issues are defence related and involve not just foreign policy but issues around hardware and other complicated relationships—the defence industry might get involved, for example. The Chairman’s question was, is the FCO leading this? Can you give us some greater clarity about how this area will be dealt with within Government?

Sir Alan Duncan: PESCO is voluntary and exists on a sort of opt-in basis, so as such it is very different from the legal membership of the EU that we



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have at the moment. It is a political framework. It is based on a set of binding commitments, which are intended to improve the military assets and defence capabilities of participating states. You are right; in that sense, it has a defence angle, but it is voluntary and we were not among those member states that notified their intention to launch PESCO.

Q153 Mike Gapes: But you still have not answered the question. Within Government, who is the lead on this?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is joint between us, I imagine, and the MOD, as many things are.

Caroline Wilson: Of course.

Q154 Mike Gapes: You imagine?

Caroline Wilson: It is something the Foreign Secretary discusses with the Defence Secretary on a fairly regular basis.

Sir Alan Duncan: Since we have not notified our intention to join it, it is not quite the same—

Mike Gapes: It's a big issue. It's up there and—

Q155 Chair: We will come to PESCO in just a second. Can I ask a question for clarification from Ms Wilson? You said that some of the EU27 are being doctrinaire and some of them are being more flexible. Would you care to highlight which ones are being more doctrinaire and which ones are being more—

Caroline Wilson: I wouldn't care to at this stage, no thank you, Chair.

Nadhim Zahawi: Go on.

Chair: You might find it more entertaining.

Q156 Andrew Rosindell: Sir Alan, PESCO has just been mentioned, so I would like to come directly to that. There is a lot of nervousness about it. Can you confirm that the UK Government has no intention either of being part of PESCO or signing up to it through the back door?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have not seen any evidence that we have such an intention. Indeed, as I said a moment ago to Mr Gapes, we never even signified so far our intention to launch it or be part of it. We see NATO as the fundamental, enduring basis for our defence participation and that will continue, I am certain to say.

Q157 Andrew Rosindell: The Government's recent statement talked about being "open to third country access where there is a clear benefit in doing so". Under what circumstances would you say there would be a clear benefit in agreeing to something that effectively dilutes the sovereignty of the UK Government over our armed forces and our defence capability? Can you envisage any circumstances in which that would happen under this Government?



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Sir Alan Duncan: We are leaving the European Union and, as such, will not be part of a more integrated EU defence structure, so I cannot see the circumstances in which we would go in the opposite direction.

Q158 **Andrew Rosindell:** But, Sir Alan, as you know only too well, the EU entangles countries and organisations into things, and that could be through defence contracts—perhaps that is a route in. The European Economic Area is an example of how you can be outside the EU and yet still be entangled in EU structures. What I think is needed from you today, if I may say so, is a clear, unambiguous statement that the UK Government will under no circumstances dilute our sovereignty to any institution of the EU—whether that is PESCO or any other type of agency or agreement—which would dilute the UK Government’s ability to exercise full sovereignty over our defence capability, our command and control, and our armed forces.

Sir Alan Duncan: As we rigorously go through the process of disentangling ourselves from the European Union, I cannot see that there is any way in which we are alternatively going to find a way of further entangling ourselves.

Q159 **Andrew Rosindell:** So that is categorically, “No,” then, is it?

Sir Alan Duncan: That is my answer.

Q160 **Andrew Rosindell:** Okay. What is your view of the European defence fund? Are the UK Government planning to contribute to that fund in any way?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not familiar with that, but if we ask my officials—it is more defence-related.

Caroline Wilson: We have been supportive of the European defence fund as something that improves the capabilities of the union and improves efficiencies, in terms of industrial, or military-industrial—

Q161 **Andrew Rosindell:** That is carrying on when we leave the EU.

Caroline Wilson: No, that is not. I am just describing the position to date. Obviously a lot will change when we leave the EU. That is one of many things that will be up for discussion.

Q162 **Chair:** As we are talking about PESCO, one thing the UK Government have been absolutely clear about—for, I would argue, most of the last 40 years—is blocking any attempt at further military integration among EU nation states, clearly favouring the NATO alliance over any potential future European army, as it has euphemistically been called. Now that we are leaving, PESCO seems to be creating what we had sought to avoid for the best part of 20 or 30 years. How would you say that British influence has changed over this?

Sir Alan Duncan: Sorry, British influence has changed over—?

Chair: Well, PESCO seems to be creating what we have spent 20 or 30 years seeking to avoid. We do not appear to be having the influence that



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we would have wished to stop it.

Sir Alan Duncan: My sense is that I am not sure it is—it is pretty loose. By the way, one answer that I can give is that there may still be some advantages for British interests in having some bilateral relationships with other countries or companies in the defence field.

To answer Mr Rosindell's question a bit more emphatically than I did, it is clear that we remain very firmly opposed to any measures that would remove or undermine the sovereignty of nations over their armed forces or lead to any competition or duplication within NATO. Several member states have already made it clear that they would not support a European army, and there is no such proposal currently on the table anyway. Our objective remains to ensure that the EU's contribution to defence and security is complementary to and respects the central role of NATO.

Q163 **Ian Austin:** On a separate but related point, have you seen any evidence of Russian interference in or influence on the Brexit referendum process?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have read what I have read in the papers. I have not seen any specific evidence across my desk, in my capacity as a Minister. In that sense, I cannot pretend to be any more deeply informed than you are.

Q164 **Ian Austin:** The Electoral Commission clearly thinks there is enough evidence to have launched a probe into this. Have you seen that happening? You say you have seen absolutely nothing at all.

Sir Alan Duncan: As I've just said, no specific evidence to this effect has come across my desk.

Chair: I think we are drifting away. Ian, if you will forgive me, we will come back to that.

Sir Alan Duncan: I'm sure you will.

Chair: Somehow I suspect we will.

Q165 **Ms Ghani:** I want to move on to resources within the Foreign Office and how it is preparing up to Brexit and the day after. We had a written submission about how the embassies were preparing, and we were told that a decision was made to place an additional 50 UK staff in the European network. When was that decision made? Can I put that to you, Minister, or Ms Wilson?

Sir Alan Duncan: I'm guessing in the course of the last six months, but don't take that as gospel.

Caroline Wilson: I believe that our Permanent Under-Secretary addressed that question when he was here just the other week and subsequently followed up yesterday with a letter detailing where those people went. As for when the decision was taken, I think he told the Committee that it was taken quite soon after the referendum, but it took

quite a while to get those people in place—up to a year. Most of those slots have now been filled.

Q166 **Chair:** That letter also lists six countries that are not in the EU27.

Caroline Wilson: Indeed.

Chair: And it doesn't put any numbers with it, at the moment.

Q167 **Ms Ghani:** We have some concern. We were told that the decision to deploy 50 extra people was an immediate decision. Why has it taken so long to have them in position?

Sir Alan Duncan: You can't just move people across the world—

Caroline Wilson: Or across Europe.

Sir Alan Duncan: Or across Europe, even. They have families and schools. They have to come from somewhere, and the gap they have left behind in turn needs to be filled. One of the perpetual challenges of the Foreign Office is what I call constant churn. If you have people, sometimes in difficult posts, only being there for two-and-a-bit years, there is a constant movement. It takes time to deploy human beings—and the right ones—into the jobs at the right level, in the right country.

This is quite a complicated jigsaw of movement—if you can have a jigsaw of movement—or matrix. It takes time. If someone is learning a language, you need a year ahead or more. You need to notify and plan. Human resources planning is a very complicated process.

Q168 **Ms Ghani:** Evidence was also given to us by the Permanent Under-Secretary that language skills were a concern. Even though they had increased, they had not reached the bar that had been hoped for. The fact that there has been a delay in people who lead embassies being able to speak the language of that country is a concern. Lord Hague said to us that FCO resources previously had increased in countries like China and India and that human resources might be pulled out into these European posts. Who makes the decision on which country to pull people out of and which countries to downgrade or upgrade? Finally, when those people are all deployed, who will decide what their priorities are? Is there a vision for what they should achieve?

Sir Alan Duncan: First, on languages, I was recently at the language school in the Foreign Office. I cannot remember the exact number offhand—although I would like, if I may, to take the opportunity to write to you on this¹—but something like 300 people are undergoing language training at the moment. There is now a very comprehensive process of teaching in the Foreign Office, much enhanced over the last few years. I suspect that was rather long overdue, and it is a good thing that we are doing it. One of our great soft power assets is that we send ambassadors to a country who can speak the language, and quite a lot of other

¹ See letter published separately clarifying



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countries do not. I would suggest that languages are a big plus point, tick-the-box-moment for the Foreign Office.

I might turn to Caroline on the question of resources. We spend a lot of time trying to get the right people in the right slots. You have to get the right level. Often the jobs will be advertised, and then there is a process of sifting. It is quite a free market within the Foreign Office structure, in which people can choose to go to those countries. Of course, that takes time as well. Do you want to say how the resource balance process works, Caroline?

Caroline Wilson: The Foreign Office Executive Committee—the ExCo, which the Permanent Under-Secretary chairs—in conjunction with the Foreign Office Management Board, will be taking the broad decisions on the overall deployment of staff. Because we had a big network shift to emerging market economies, including China and India, a few years ago we lost resource in the Europe network, so part of it has been about redressing the balance. As for deciding what those people do, that is done centrally, with the directorate working with post, and filtered down to our embassies, which have their own business plans for the post and the people there. Those are agreed with London. Of course, at the moment, we have a lot of the additional resource there working very closely with DExEU on our objectives for leaving the European Union.

Sir Alan Duncan: What we are doing through this process—let us broadly call it reprioritisation—is trying to identify ways in which we can do some of the same work differently, perhaps remotely. We are looking at a lot of the job descriptions to see what is happening. We are developing proposals for making some savings across Asia-Pacific, south Asia and Afghanistan, the Americas and Africa in order to release about £4.2 million-worth of savings to fund these 50 new jobs, so that we can do it that way.

Q169 **Ms Ghani:** As well as those 50 new posts, we have been told that an additional 100 UK staff would be recruited into European posts. Is that correct?

Caroline Wilson: It is not an additional 100, it is up to an additional 50, so it would be 100 in total, I believe. That is something we are currently—

Q170 **Ms Ghani:** There will be an additional 150 UK staff posted to, or just dealing with, Europe. What I need to understand is this: if new people are being recruited or deployed, what is their overall objective and who decides the priority countries to which they are posted? There must be priority countries in Europe that you are hoping to have stronger relationships with than with other countries in Europe—or not.

Sir Alan Duncan: Go ahead, Caroline; I do not recognise that figure.

Mark Gooding: Is the question on the figure of 150?

Sir Alan Duncan: Mark to the rescue.

Mark Gooding: It includes both postings in the UK and also overseas, so that is where the figure comes from.

Caroline Wilson: But the overseas one is 100.

Q171 **Ms Ghani:** But which European countries will the Foreign Office be prioritising post-Brexit?

Caroline Wilson: Just to say that we are still in talks with the Treasury about the additional resource for those 50. As for deciding which countries are a priority, at the moment it is fair to say that all European countries are a priority, because every country counts in our exit negotiations. Any one country could veto. We have important equities with all of them, and they are all important for different reasons. Of course, we have broader relationships with some, which clearly need more resource—that clearly applies to the biggest countries—but we have needed to upscale or increase our presence in all European countries.

Q172 **Ms Ghani:** You have upscaled the seniority of seven ambassadors in European posts. Which posts are those? That might help us understand which countries you might be prioritising.

Caroline Wilson: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Luxembourg, Slovenia and, I believe, Slovakia

Ms Ghani: So those are the priority countries?

Caroline Wilson: Not because they are priorities—I am not saying they are not priorities—but because the ambassadors there were not in our senior management structure prior to the EU referendum. Following the EU referendum, the work in those posts has become more important to us.

Sir Alan Duncan: It means that all our ambassadors in those EU countries are of that rank and seniority.

Chair: You're bringing them up.

Sir Alan Duncan: We are bringing them up to senior rank, so that we do not have, as it were, a more junior cadre and a more senior cadre in contrast. They are all up there at SMS level.

Ms Ghani: Thank you.

Q173 **Ian Murray:** Can I try to unpack some of these numbers a little bit? The Minister talks about 50 new posts, but they are not new posts, are they? They are Foreign Office personnel redeployed into Europe from other postings.

Sir Alan Duncan: There are 50 new in Europe.

Q174 **Ian Murray:** No, they are 50 Foreign Office-paid personnel coming from outwith Europe into Europe.

Caroline Wilson: Not entirely, because they are from resources that have been redeployed; I do not like to talk about staff being a resource. We have managed to generate savings elsewhere that may not equate to



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taking 50 people away from other posts. In some of our posts, someone may be more expensive, for example, than being in a European post; we may have three in Europe for the price of one in another country. It is not about taking 50 people out of non-European posts, it is about the savings that we have managed to generate—by cutting some people, certainly, but possibly not as many as 50.

Q175 **Chair:** Sorry, so you may end up with 50 people in Europe having taken 40 away from the rest of the network?

Caroline Wilson: Conceivably, and from other savings, for example.

Sir Alan Duncan: To make up that £4.2 million, I imagine.

Q176 **Ian Murray:** So how many additional Foreign Office personnel that you did not have before are included in that 50? That is globally, not Europe. Everybody talks about the additional 50, but these are not new people, are they? These are Foreign Office personnel.

Sir Alan Duncan: New to Europe.

Q177 **Ian Murray:** So how much additional resource, as a global figure, does the Foreign Office have to deal with Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: We have not been given extra resource in that sense, but through savings reclassification and redeployment, as I was explaining earlier, we have created or generated the £4.2 million-worth of savings that has allowed us to increase the number of people within Europe by 50.

Caroline Wilson: If the Minister may, he will give you a written answer on this. We do have some additional resource that is not just for the Europe network but to deal with the implications of Brexit on sanctions, on consular, on work across the board and on the overseas territories—Gibraltar and so on. If we may, we will follow up in writing on that, because there is some separate additional new resource.²

Q178 **Ian Murray:** If the Budget is passed this evening, the Chancellor has allocated an extra £3 billion to departmental budgets for Brexit. How much money will you be asking the Treasury for to boost the numbers in your Department?

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not know the answer to that or whether there will be a specific bid from the Foreign Office. The Budget expenditure forecast has given us pretty well the same as we had before—exactly the same—so I do not think there is a clear answer. I imagine most of that will be for other Departments. We are tremendously efficient in working with the resources we have.

Q179 **Ian Murray:** So the strategy of the Foreign Office in this new global Britain, post-Brexit, is to remove Foreign Office capability outwith the EU and to redeploy it within the EU? Is that correct? Would that be a fair description? You have to make savings somewhere.

² See letter published separately clarifying



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Sir Alan Duncan: I would say that is putting it oversimply.

Chris Bryant: It is pretty spot on.

Q180 **Ian Murray:** You have saved £4.2 million from, if I may use this term, “Global Foreign Office”, to put into the EU. Non-EU savings have therefore been made to plug capability problems in the EU post-Brexit.

Sir Alan Duncan: Mr Murray, you are asking the question as if to imply—I accept that you did not specifically say—that we are sort of lifting 50 people from somewhere else across the world in order to boost the EU numbers by 50.

Ian Murray: Pretty much.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am glad you said pretty much, because that is not what we are doing. As I have tried to explain, we have tried to use certain people differently, many of them maybe in the centre here in King Charles Street in Whitehall. We are looking at how jobs may be done slightly differently from the way they have been done, and that way it would generate the £4.2 million in order to increase the European numbers by 50, but it is not simply by identifying 50 people in overseas postings across the world, lifting them up and planting them in Europe. It is not as straightforward as that.

Q181 **Ian Murray:** So how many have been identified, lifted and planted in Europe, of the 50?

Sir Alan Duncan: Some of the project, as I was explaining, is still going on, in terms of whether we now do change some numbers, perhaps in Asia—I listed the countries a moment ago. I do not think we can put a specific number on it and say that these people are, as it were, being cancelled, and they somehow reappear across the map.

Ian Murray: I am still unclear, but I will let it go.

Q182 **Chris Bryant:** I bet you that is exactly how it works. You know it is. I do not know why you are pretending otherwise. The truth is that global Britain, as I understood it after Brexit, was all about looking out to the rest of the world, and if you were finding an extra £4.25 million, you would be spending it on putting people in China, India and the Commonwealth countries—countries we wanted to do more trade with—but in actual fact you are retrenching back to the 27.

Sir Alan Duncan: Let’s not also forget that there is a whole new Department called the Department for International Trade, which is working alongside us for that important global outreach, so I think I am entitled to point to those resources working alongside us as being an important part of the global Britain we are trying to champion.

Q183 **Chris Bryant:** But one of the things you said at the beginning, in answer to Ms Ghani, was that one of the difficulties of getting people moving quickly was that you had to take them from one place and put them in another place, and now you are saying you did not have to do that.



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Sir Alan Duncan: What I said was that you are not necessarily taking them from positions abroad, but you are of course moving people. People need to fill slots which require people in them, but it does not mean that you are reducing 50 people in our embassies abroad in order to put them in Europe. It is not as absolute like-for-like as that.

Chair: Very briefly, Nadhim.

Nadhim Zahawi: Very briefly, Chairman—

Sir Alan Duncan: I would offer to write in detail if it helps.

Ian Murray: It would help, yes.

Q184 **Nadhim Zahawi:** It would. My understanding from Caroline is that the £4.25 million saving is one pot, but there was an additional resource that you received to prepare for Brexit. How much is that additional resource on top of the £4.25 million?

Caroline Wilson: We will have to write to you with the exact figure. I would rather not get it wrong.

Chair: Can we move on? Mike Gapes.

Q185 **Mike Gapes:** Sir Alan, you have referred to other Government Departments and the work they do. Sir Simon McDonald, PUS, told this Committee, "The FCO is not leading on Brexit, but we do do Brexit. The network is the key thing." Can you tell us what that means?

Sir Alan Duncan: Exactly what it says.

Q186 **Mike Gapes:** What is the FCO doing apart from providing a platform to host other Departments, for example with your bilateral discussions with the Latvians, Lithuanians, Slovenians, Slovaks and all these others about Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: Tons of stuff. That is our bread and butter.

Q187 **Mike Gapes:** Could you tell us, please? It would be interesting to know what the relationship is between the FCO and the Department for International Trade, and the Department for Exiting the European Union in this period.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is true to say that we will join everything up as closely as possible in one UK base in any country, but irrespective of our Brexit negotiations, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will continue with all of the bilateral engagement that exists with any—

Q188 **Mike Gapes:** Can I ask specifically about Brexit? What are we doing with regard to Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: Most of it is done by the Department for Exiting the European Union. We will, in our bilateral engagement with all the 27, reinforce the stated and open positions of this Government—for instance, at the moment, trying to get on to the second stage of negotiations and explaining why. But we have many other bilateral—well, you want to stick



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to Brexit, but most of what we are doing is not Brexit. In a way, that is the whole point: we have the whole of the rest of the world as well.

Caroline Wilson: If I may add to that, as with all Government Departments, we are involved in cross-Whitehall processes. There are a lot of committees we are represented in. We have to advise the Foreign Secretary on Brexit. We have particular equities as the Foreign Office, and particular interests in issues such as citizens' rights, which ultimately could impact on Brits overseas. So we are very engaged on citizens' rights, for example, and a number of other issues—I have already mentioned the issue of the overseas territories, and Gibraltar, sanctions and so on. As the Minister has said, beyond that we are also very involved in working in partnership with DExEU on the lobbying and influencing around Brexit, and on tactical advice and input into those negotiations.

Q189 **Mike Gapes:** When the former permanent secretary Lord Ricketts said that rather than being joined up it was more like a "cacophony", was he right?

Sir Alan Duncan: I don't know what he was describing as a cacophony. He couldn't possibly—

Mike Gapes: He was describing how other countries see, because of different voices coming through, this network of relationships not really working—because of the different voices, the cacophony and sound.

Sir Alan Duncan: Actually, I don't think he is right. The voices, as we go around the world, be it from the Foreign Office, the Department for International Trade or the Ministry of Defence, are actually very well co-ordinated, harmonious and, in clichéd English, sung off the same hymn sheet. We are remarkable as a country in having Departments that are very well joined up, particularly when they are going abroad. That is one of the advantages of having an ambassador in a country who is, if you like, the top of the pinnacle in any kind of embassy or mission that we have.

Q190 **Mike Gapes:** May I go on to the future? In your written submission, you say that the FCO is ensuring that we pay due attention to the future shape of our bilateral relationships. Apart from the recruiting of staff—whether extra or not, I won't go into—how are you doing this?

Sir Alan Duncan: I suppose an example of how we are doing it is that I spend most of my life on a plane—

Mike Gapes: Haven't Foreign Office Ministers always spent most of their life on planes?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, and that perhaps explains as well that what we have done in the past we will continue to do in the future. I think it is true to say that we have made an enormous effort to step up the manner of our engagement, not just with EU countries but with all, because one of the things that we have to make clear, and indeed prove, is that as we leave the EU we are not leaving the European stage or the world stage—



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not in any way at all. If anything, we are going to have to do more things bilaterally in both sections of the world in order to prove our point—and I think we are. So we are travelling to these countries with clear messages and great determination. I think that people do appreciate that the UK as a P5 member, in the G7, G20 and NATO, with DFID spending and so on, is not going to let itself be diminished as a result of leaving the EU.

Q191 Mike Gapes: Clearly we did not get a breakthrough in October. There are tensions as we approach the EU summit in December. What specifically are our posts doing to ensure that our bilateral relations with the EU27 are not suffering as a result of these difficulties that are coming out of the process in the negotiations and the tensions.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think by addressing them, and by addressing them clearly and purposefully.

Q192 Mike Gapes: How do you do that? Give me an example. For example, are you trying to pick off Latvia or Slovenia, to get them to put influence on the EU's negotiating position?

Sir Alan Duncan: We will home in on all 27 to try and persuade them to make sure that we can reach an agreement which is, between the UK and the EU, mutually beneficial and not, as it could end up being, mutually harmful. So that means that you will have engagement at ambassadorial level with the highest possible strata of every host country. Then there are very, very close working relationships at official level, from the Foreign Office, and locally with officials in the likes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the presidency or prime ministership—whatever it might be. That is the stock in trade of our bilateral engagement, and has been for decades if not centuries.

Q193 Mike Gapes: But given these difficulties, how do our posts specifically give the message about what the relationship will be after the EU negotiating process? If we are leaving the European Union, what kind of relationship will we have with the EU? How do they convey that?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will do it in a sentence and then, if I may, hand over to Caroline. It is face to face, saying, "Look, we wish the EU no harm. We are leaving it, but we will, upon leaving, deal both with the EU as an entity and also with individual countries on a bilateral basis." We make that very clear, directly, from the very top of any country down.

Caroline Wilson: Absolutely, and I can assure you that there has never been such an intense phase of engagement with our European partners. Just to give you an example, there have been more than 50 ministerial visits to Germany alone this year. Since 2015, we have seen 124 UK ministerial visits to Germany. It is not quite as many as that for other countries, but there are similarly high figures for the major countries, and many, many visits to other countries as well. It is not just about ministerial engagement; we have been doing a huge amount at all levels and in all areas. To cite a few examples, we have many bilateral fora, which we are reinvigorating and in some cases launching, such as the first ever UK-Greece forum. We are reinvigorating well-established ones such



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as the tertulias between the UK and Spain, which was a very successful and well attended forum.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is the Spanish annual dialogue.

Q194 **Mike Gapes:** How is this reinvigorated attempt to contact—to discuss—being received?

Sir Alan Duncan: There is, of course, a spectrum of reaction to our referendum decision, but most, I think, increasingly say, "We respect the democratic outcome. We do want to work with you." There will be some who say, "We're very upset you're going. We wish you weren't, but you are," but who none the less accept that this process is going to go through.

Q195 **Mike Gapes:** Have we found any support or enthusiasm for the fact that we are going through this process?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that across the world there is—

Q196 **Mike Gapes:** No, I am not talking about that. I am talking about the EU27. These questions are specifically about Europe.

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not think we can say we have met any great enthusiasm, but that does not mean that we are not going to have a sensible working outcome.

Q197 **Mike Gapes:** Okay. What plans do you have for Brexit day plus one? We were told by Sir Simon that the FCO will resume responsibility for relations with the European Union from DExEU in 2019. If that is the case, what will happen on Brexit day plus one?

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not think it will be a cliff edge like that, but who can tell? If DExEU is wound up, the Foreign Office, as you have just stated, would resume its responsibilities for all such overseas relationships in that way, without the parallel, if you like, negotiation exercise that will have been going on for the period before. It will mean that we will be the basis of our relations with individual countries, but also with the EU as an entity. Who knows what we are going to end up with? It will depend, to a certain extent, on both the nature of the agreement we reach with the EU and the nature of the transition. I envisage that there will be a significant presence in Brussels to be the bilateral vehicle for talking with the EU.

Q198 **Mike Gapes:** To be clear, it is possible that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office would not presume responsibility in 2019. Is that what you are saying? Are you saying that, in fact, if there was a transition period, the Department for Exiting the EU would continue to have a lead responsibility, despite what we were told in a previous evidence session?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not equipped to answer that question definitively, because there are still some things that have obviously not been agreed about our departure from the EU, but I think it is clearly foreseen that DExEU is there for the purposes of the negotiations and that the Foreign Office will assume once again the responsibility for—



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Q199 **Mike Gapes:** In 2019? *[Interruption.]* We can't show waving hands in the transcript.

Sir Alan Duncan: Well, if that's what was said, that was said. It is not a discussion that I have been party to, but if that's what you have been told, that is it.

Q200 **Chair:** And do you have any thoughts on the structure of UKRep for the future—D-day plus one?

Sir Alan Duncan: Off the top of my head, it is going to be necessary and will need to be a significant conduit or base for our negotiations with the EU as the EU.

Q201 **Chair:** There are ways of looking at it that may be helpful. The embassy in Washington, for example, is an enormous operation that effectively has a core of Foreign Office staff, but with so many add-ons from agencies and so on that it is almost a super-Government Department, in a funny way. Do you see UKRep as being that sort of thing, or do you see it more as plugging into the EU structure while the bilateral stuff is done in Paris, Berlin, Rome and so on?

Sir Alan Duncan: I suspect both, but Caroline may have a more developed concept for this.

Caroline Wilson: As you know, UKRep is already an organisation that represents the whole of Government, and there are many people from other Government Departments in UKRep. We are of course looking at what third countries do in Brussels and how their representations or missions there are staffed. Much of it depends on the type of partnership we have with the European Union and how we need to service that partnership, assuming that there will still be some kinds of meetings where the EU and the UK are present. We are looking at that in conjunction with colleagues. I think the Foreign Secretary also commented on this when he was before your Committee, and he said he anticipated it would still be a very significant presence and a significant mission for us in Brussels.

Q202 **Chair:** When we have had major deployments and a significant overseas presence in the past, we have sometimes considered having Ministers resident in foreign countries. Has that been considered? Sir Alan?

Sir Alan Duncan: I was thinking more of you, Chair. I don't think that has been considered. I don't think that has happened for a long time, and I am not aware of any discussion of it being revived.

Q203 **Mike Gapes:** It's clear that you are finding huge pressures from the increasing demands at this time from Europe. Given that—

Sir Alan Duncan: You mean the Foreign Office generally or Ministers?

Q204 **Mike Gapes:** I'll come on to your role as a Minister in the second part of my remarks. Is it not time to have a separate Minister within the FCO who is not dealing with Europe and the Americas? Should we not focus entirely on the European area and have more resource and time for that,



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rather than having huge amounts of traveling all over the world?

Sir Alan Duncan: I'm afraid this begs a lot of questions—for instance, how many Ministers there should be in the Foreign Office in the first place. You can only be responsible for fewer countries if you have more Ministers. One needs to appreciate that there is a layering here. Invariably, the Prime Minister will deal with her counterparts in France, Germany and most of these countries; the Foreign Secretary with his; and me, as a Minister of State, more with my counterparts. So a lot of the really serious negotiations will be done at a higher level. If you were to have a Minister who is dedicated to only Europe, he or she would not necessarily be part of those higher-level discussions, which are an inevitable part of the diplomacy that surrounds the negotiations going on at the moment and, even without them, the relations that exist anyway between us and our neighbouring countries. I am not sure it would necessarily make the big difference that your question implies.

Chair: Let's move on.

Q205 **Royston Smith:** Some of the Committee visited Ireland a week or so ago, coinciding with the Foreign Secretary's visit, although that was a coincidence rather than being planned. We met our counterparts, the Foreign Minister, businessmen and the former President, Mary McAleese, and all of them talked about how important UK-Ireland relations are. How important are UK-Ireland relations to you and the Foreign Office at the moment?

Sir Alan Duncan: Enormously important. You will appreciate the sensitivities at the moment, given the position of politics both in Ireland and in Northern Ireland, so you will forgive me if I am cautious today in not wanting to say anything that steps on those sensitivities. It is enormously important, because they are right next door to us, furthest west in the EU. The preservation and continuation of the Northern Ireland peace process is absolutely essential, and wrapped up in our relationship with Ireland as well. We recognise that we do want what has been called the frictionless border, so that as much of the status quo in people's daily life can continue unobstructed. To find a way of doing this, in order to continue our closeness to Ireland and to preserve the Northern Ireland peace process and the way of life of both sides of the border on the island of Ireland, is absolutely essential.

Q206 **Royston Smith:** In your written submission, you said that we must invest in a comprehensive relationship with Ireland, along with France and Germany. I think that is becoming more obvious as these conversations about Brexit and the border continue. How was the Foreign Office approaching that before Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: When you say "that", you mean—

Q207 **Royston Smith:** Investing in our relationship with Ireland.

Sir Alan Duncan: Oh, I see.

Q208 **Royston Smith:** At the moment we seem to be talking endlessly—Ireland



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has become a specific issue in the Brexit negotiations. What was our investment in trying to have a comprehensive relationship with Ireland before Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: Do you want to start, Caroline?

Caroline Wilson: I think it is fair to say that the bilateral relationship with Ireland in the past few years has actually reached a high point. It is at one of the best points we have ever achieved in terms of the bilateral relationship, following the state visit of Her Majesty the Queen in 2011 and, following that, that of the President of Ireland to the UK, a number of other royal visits—most notably of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales last year—and lots of shared commemorative activities around some incredibly sensitive anniversaries. We have really achieved an incredible level of shared understanding with Ireland over recent years, and that has been combined with regular contacts between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, most recently at the Gothenburg Social Summit just the other week. We have an annual dialogue of permanent secretaries between the UK and Ireland, plus there is a huge amount of other co-operation on defence, health, culture and many other areas, as you would expect.

Chair: Can I bring in Ian briefly?

Q209 **Ian Murray:** I, too, was in Ireland last week. I have yet to hear anyone from either Northern Ireland or the island of Ireland saying that what the UK Government are trying to achieve is either possible or desirable. I know there are Trade and DExEU issues around us removing ourselves from the European Union, but from a Foreign Office and a foreign affairs perspective, do you not agree that the UK Government's current strategy of taking the single market and customs union off the table is completely and utterly incompatible with a frictionless, seamless, no hard border in Ireland, as everyone in Ireland told us when we were there two weeks ago?

Sir Alan Duncan: Well, that is why we are proposing an arrangement that achieves the objectives of a frictionless border. I understand what you are saying about the single market and the customs union, but that is the broad intent and position of the Government in the Brexit negotiations. I don't quite agree with you when you say that people don't share our vision for a frictionless border. That is what they would like.

Ian Murray: No, they share it—they just don't think it's possible.

Sir Alan Duncan: They don't think it's deliverable, so we need, through negotiations in the second phase, to find a way of making it possible.

Chair: Andrew, you wanted to say something briefly?

Q210 **Andrew Rosindell:** On the current situation with Ireland regarding the border, surely it is possible to come to an arrangement whereby trade can continue freely between two countries that share one piece of land? There are examples of that in other parts of the world. Surely the British Government should be championing the solutions to this more strongly?



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At the moment, we are seeing an attempt by the Irish Taoiseach to effectively try to force a customs border between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. That cannot be right, and surely Her Majesty's Government need to counter that categorically—"You cannot divide the United Kingdom into sections in that way"?

Sir Alan Duncan: We are championing exactly the kind of co-operation that you would like to see, but we recognise, as Mr Murray's question implied, that if you are going to have a working border like that, it will need to be subject to the same rules as across the rest of the EU. The question is: how can one have consistency across the EU but also the sort of free border we would like to see in Northern Ireland? There is a challenge in joining up these two possibly different—

Q211 **Andrew Rosindell:** But surely the Government should have this clearly laid out now? The reason why the Irish Taoiseach is able to make this point is because HMG need to lay out clearly what the plan is, perhaps looking at the Norway-Sweden or US-Canada examples. There are plenty of examples in the world whereby countries have a frictionless border and trade freely without the problems that I think Brussels is conjuring up in order to punish us, and to potentially harm Ireland, to deter other countries from leaving the European Union. Should we not be more robust at this point?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is all about the negotiations. Mark Gooding is our expert on this.

Mark Gooding: In the Government's position papers over the summer we made a number of proposals for options that might be possible, either for streamlining the border or for having a new customs union with the EU. What we need to do, as the Minister has said, is to move to phase two of the talks to actually look at some of these ideas in detail. I will not go into detail now, but it is about authorised economic operators and what kind of customs declarations people have to fill in and when.

The main thing is that we recognise that a unique solution is required here, and that people need to be creative. We want to move to phase two as quickly as possible so we can have that discussion.

Q212 **Andrew Rosindell:** You mentioned a new customs union with the EU. Can you rephrase that? Do you mean a customs agreement or a union?

Mark Gooding: In our position paper, the model we set out was for a new customs union or a streamlined arrangement. Those are the two broad options. In terms of what it will look like in the end, we need to move to phase two so we can discuss that in detail. All I am saying is that there are options and ideas out there that we need to focus on.

Q213 **Chair:** This is clearly a moment of problematic conversation between us and the Irish Government. What are you doing to ensure that the bilateral relationship isn't damaged?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think there are close relations, actually. I have recently been to Dublin, albeit before their governmental problems burst,



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if you like. There are good contacts between the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Minister, Mr Coveney. I think that the closeness of personal contacts is pretty strong, but it is a slightly bumpy period, born partly of their domestic problems, which we hope they will overcome.

Q214 Royston Smith: Ms Wilson talked about our relationship before Brexit, which sounds like it has never been better in recent times. There has been a lot of contact and bilateral visits. We want a frictionless border, as they do—we want the same thing. We have all these contacts. You have all these meetings and discussions with people. Were you then surprised to hear the recent statement from the Irish Foreign Minister that he wanted a four to five-year transition period after Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: The nature of the transition will be negotiated in due course, and we are not yet at that stage.

Royston Smith: I am aware of that, Sir Alan, but were you surprised when the Foreign Minister said that he wanted a four to five-year transition period after Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think I am past being surprised by anything on this issue at the moment.

Royston Smith: So, with our relationship never being stronger, and our relationships with individuals in Ireland being as they were, you had no idea that the Foreign Minister was about to suggest that he would like a four to five-year transition period after Brexit.

Sir Alan Duncan: We take everything any Foreign Minister says very seriously and we will continue as we are planning with our negotiations, which we hope will go to the second phase soon.

Q215 Ian Murray: Minister, may I go back to the border issue for a second? During the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, Foreign Office Ministers of the UK Government said that if Scotland were to leave the UK single market, it would mean a hard border in Berwick. Why is it any different from Ireland?

Sir Alan Duncan: You will forgive me if I resist the temptation to make comparisons between Ireland and Scotland at this stage.

Ian Murray: Why?

Sir Alan Duncan: Because I think it is unnecessarily—

Q216 Ian Murray: I was on the same side as you, Minister, as you remember. We both made a very strong argument that Scotland leaving the UK single market would require a hard border between Scotland and England because of the free movement of goods and people. How can you reconcile the issue now between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, post-EU?

Sir Alan Duncan: You put your finger on the point that I made a moment ago, about the challenge and the need we now have to square that circle



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of having rules within the EU that will let us reach an arrangement with the EU that allows for a frictionless border with Ireland.

Q217 **Ian Murray:** Could we reasonably conclude that the UK leaving the EU has the potential to break up the United Kingdom?

Sir Alan Duncan: I would like to think not. I think the Union is of the utmost importance to us. It is a strong part of our policy that it will and should endure. I think there will be a way of, I hope, avoiding any physical infrastructure, and that is what I think the discussions will now turn to.

Q218 **Ian Murray:** Could I ask a quick supplementary question? Is it not the case that a more frictionless and seamless border post-Brexit makes the break-up of the United Kingdom more likely?

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not see this as something that will lead to the break-up of the United Kingdom. Do you want to add something, Caroline?

Caroline Wilson: The Government is absolutely clear that we are not going to do anything that will in any way undermine the economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom.

Q219 **Ian Murray:** But with all due respect, this is all completely contradictory, isn't it? "Seamlessness" and "frictionless" mean that the arguments against breaking up any single market are much diluted. And if you can't deliver frictionless and seamless, you can't deliver the Government's policy post-Brexit between the Republic and Northern Ireland.

Sir Alan Duncan: Well, that is what we are endeavouring to do. We are not yet at that phase of the negotiations, but I hope that is where we are heading. I hope we are heading towards an agreement that will address what are perfectly legitimate but not insoluble questions.

Q220 **Chair:** Would you not agree, Minister, that the Union between the three nations in Great Britain and the fourth in Northern Ireland is rather more than a customs union or a single market? It is a Union not only of Parliaments and peoples, but of culture and history. It comes to a much, much deeper level than the Union we ever enjoyed with the EU or any other foreign state.

Sir Alan Duncan: I totally agree with that. As such, it is a unique and globally significant structure. We are a sovereign nation. We do not in any way want to threaten that.

Q221 **Chris Bryant:** On 26 March 2010, I was written a letter by a Conservative Member of Parliament in my capacity as Europe Minister, asking, "If Scotland were to leave the United Kingdom, would there be a hard border between Scotland and England?"

Sir Alan Duncan: You're going to tell me that I wrote the letter.

Chris Bryant: No, it was someone else.

Sir Alan Duncan: That is a relief.



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Chris Bryant: The point is that I sought legal advice from the Foreign Office, and it was extremely clear that there would be a hard border. Has the legal advice from the Foreign Office changed, because I might send you a letter?

Sir Alan Duncan: I would be very interested in seeing your letter, Mr Bryant.

Chris Bryant: No, but has there—

Sir Alan Duncan: I have not seen any specific legal advice on that.

Chris Bryant: If you get out my letter from 2010—it was the day before my wedding; that is why I remember the date—

Sir Alan Duncan: If I am allowed to dig out former Ministers' letters—

Chris Bryant: I am allowing you to dig it out.

Sir Alan Duncan: I will relay the permission, for which I am grateful.

Chris Bryant: Then you can provide that to the Committee.

Sir Alan Duncan: It will mean I will know when your anniversary is so I can send you a card.

Chris Bryant: But the serious point here is that the legal impression in the Foreign Office has always been that if you are not in the customs union—if you are breaking the Union—there has to be a hard border. It is not a frictionless border, but a fictional border you are talking about, or it is a fiction that it should be a frictionless border. It is a nonsense. It is a word that does not mean anything. I know you believe that as well.

Sir Alan Duncan: I will make a distinction between fiction and friction.

Q222 **Chair:** There are some examples on the island of Ireland of borderless trade, including in agriculture, where a single economic area existed before our membership of the European Union and in various different ways before the single market came about. There are checks on travel to and from Northern Ireland, as there are checks on travel to and from London and Birmingham or wherever else it is when one gets on an aircraft or boat, although that would be a little absurd for Birmingham. Surely some form of union within the island of Ireland could be envisioned that does not threaten the much deeper and much stronger Union of the sovereign nation of the United Kingdom.

Sir Alan Duncan: That is sort of what we are looking to, but for it to work, it has to be part of a broader exit agreement with the EU, because Ireland will consider itself subject to the laws of the EU and a border between Ireland and Northern Ireland is effectively a border between the UK and the EU. That essentially is the challenge to resolve.

Q223 **Chris Bryant:** There is another element to this, which is Wales, in the sense that a large amount of the import-export is directly through Wales. If you end up with a united Ireland, which I am sure cannot possibly be the aim of the Government—



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Chair: That is not what I was suggesting.

Chris Bryant: I understand that. If you end up with a border that is the Irish Sea, it is Wales that takes the hit.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, but I think the thing about Northern Ireland and Ireland is the much more rapid regular daily movement, particularly of people.

Chris Bryant: And Wales.

Ian Murray: North-east Wales.

Chair: There is a lot of east-west, as we heard from IBEC. Ian, do you want to come in?

Ian Austin: No, I think the questions I was going to ask have been answered.

Mike Gapes: When we were in Dublin, we talked to the business organisations there. Their trade from the Irish Republic to the rest of the United Kingdom is much greater than their trade with Northern Ireland. The reality is that the UK is used as a transit point for much of the EU trade from the Irish Republic, in both directions. If we are out of the customs union, it causes complications not just for the Northern Ireland issue, but for Ireland's trade across and through the UK to the continent. How are we going to resolve that unless the UK stays in the customs union?

Caroline Wilson: We are determined not just to preserve north-south co-operation but to recognise the importance of east-west. In terms of the volume of flows, you are absolutely correct. Of course, there are lots of other reasons, including political and social ones, why the north-south co-operation and those flows are just as important in different ways. We have to achieve all those objectives, and that is what the Government are determined to do.

Q224 **Mike Gapes:** How?

Caroline Wilson: As my colleague and the Minister have said, we have a number of ideas. We want to get on to talk about that. We recognise the need for specific solutions regarding the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We are absolutely determined, as the Minister said, to avoid physical infrastructure.

Mark Gooding: Could I make two points? On the customs point, as Caroline has said, the key is in the detail and having a unique solution. The two concepts I mentioned, from our papers earlier in the year, are for the overall UK-EU relationship. I should have said "partnership" not "union" when I said that a new partnership was one of the options; Mr Rosindell was correct. We recognise the need for a unique solution there.

On the other points that the Chair alluded to, we have a large scale of agreement in discussions with Brussels on preserving the common travel

area, but also on the Good Friday agreement more generally. On those areas there is a high degree of consensus.

Q225 Royston Smith: Sir Alan, unquestionably everyone wants a frictionless border. There has been criticism in the past about what plans were put in place in the event that the country voted for Brexit, and there are probably some lessons to be learned about pre-planning for things that may or may not happen in the future. Let's assume that Mr Bryant's fiction is a fiction and it does not become a fact that there is some sort of non-frictionless border—a hard border, in other words. Does the Foreign Office have any plans to manage its relationship with the Irish, both north and south, in the event that, even though it is your intention and desire to have a frictionless border, that is not possible?

Sir Alan Duncan: First of all, relations with Northern Ireland are a domestic matter and not a Foreign Office matter.

Q226 Royston Smith: Do you have any plans to deal with the domestic matter and the Foreign Office matter?

Sir Alan Duncan: For the Northern Ireland interests, we work very closely with the Northern Ireland Office. I would stress that that is a domestic and not a bilateral foreign matter, because they are part of us, the United Kingdom. With Ireland, I would go back to making the points we were making earlier about the depth of the continuing relationship we have at all levels with the Irish Government, wherever we can.

Perhaps all these questions boil down, admittedly, to our absolutely recognising the need for specific solutions that reflect Northern Ireland and Ireland's unique circumstances. That is what we are hoping for in the next stage of negotiations. We totally accept they are going to have to be unique. They matter. I hope that they will be seen across the 27 to matter as much for them, in the interests of one of their members—one of the 27—as they do specifically for us in Northern Ireland and as the UK. So I hope it is seen as in everyone's interests, on both sides of the negotiating process, to resolve this, so that we can retain the peace and the good working practices between north and south on the whole island of Ireland in the future. That is our real, deep wish and hope.³

Q227 Royston Smith: But do you have any contingency in the event that that is not the outcome?

Sir Alan Duncan: As Margaret Thatcher once said, the possibilities of failure do not exist.

Chris Bryant: And yet they do. *[Interruption.]*

Sir Alan Duncan: We are in the Thatcher Room, after all; exactly.

Q228 Chair: The Foreign Secretary's first visit to Ireland was only last week. What do you feel was achieved in it?

³ See letter published separately clarifying



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Sir Alan Duncan: The Foreign Secretary has, I would like to think, a good relationship with Foreign Minister Coveney. I think just going there, instead of meeting in Brussels or wherever it might be, is important. That is why travel matters.

Chair: That is why we went there.

Sir Alan Duncan: Indeed; that is why you went there—absolutely. It is why I have been there and why the Lord Mayor has been there, and Her Majesty the Queen. It is always important when a Foreign Secretary goes to another country. It is more than symbolic. It is significant. It is appreciated. It is an important part of the bilateral glue that we'd like to see in all our relations.

Chair: Let us move on to another area. Mike, you were going to start us off.

Q229 **Mike Gapes:** This is about UK relationships and global Britain as a result of Brexit. Given what we have heard already about the need that you have had to transfer some resources from outside the European network into the European network, how can the Government ensure that we have the resources we need to fulfil the promise of global Britain?

Sir Alan Duncan: Global Britain is not just a matter of resources. It is also a matter of attitude and determination and, if you like, our post-Brexit philosophy. That philosophy is one of free trade, global outreach, encouraging business between the UK and other countries, if possible through free trade agreements, and also our continuing defence and security responsibilities not diminishing.

We have a Department for International Trade and a Foreign Office and in many of our embassies, through a lot of cross-agency co-operation—the National Crime Agency and things like that—helping countries address organised crime, drug trafficking, people trafficking and modern slavery, and through our Foreign Office programmes, we are trying to encourage the rule of law. This is, when seen altogether, a very good picture of Britain's global outreach.

I will give you one example. In Colombia, where there has been an agreement with FARC and a peace process, we are significant in trying to make sure that that stays in shape. We are not going to resile from those kinds of involvements and duties abroad.

Q230 **Mike Gapes:** That may be your intention, but it is not going very well, is it? We have had recent setbacks. We had the vote in the UN General Assembly, which we discussed previously, about the Chagos Islands. We have only recently had this decision about the International Court of Justice where we, for the first time in 71 years—since it was established—won't have a UK judge there. The journalist James Landale has referred to Britain in retreat. Is that how the rest of the world sees us—with a diminishing role because of the decision taken in the referendum?



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Sir Alan Duncan: No, and we are determined to make sure that we are not seen like that, which is why the label that I am pleased to say tripped off your tongue, about “global Britain”, illustrates exactly what we are trying to be and do in everything we look to across the world. We are not shrinking; we are not diminishing.

I also think that your picture of how we are seen and what we are doing is slightly unfairly pessimistic. Of course, we lost the ICJ vote. We have sent you a memo on it, and I wasn't actually involved in it, but I see this as perhaps a slight shift in Asia's attempts to flex its muscles a bit within the UN. This may be a growing phenomenon, but I don't see it as one that is specifically linked to our referendum result.

Q231 **Mike Gapes:** If the decision was taken because of Asia flexing its muscles, and India got support in the General Assembly and we did not, how would you explain the fact that France still has a judge who has been re-elected, and that all the other members of the Security Council have their people staying in the system while we do not? Why would France not have the same problems if it was about Asia flexing its muscles?

Sir Alan Duncan: As I explained to the Committee before coming here, having obviously agreed to be a witness for your main inquiry, this is not my area of responsibility. Therefore, in place of my speaking on an area that is not my responsibility, you have been sent a memo. I am not sure that there is anything that I can really add.

Q232 **Mike Gapes:** The memo does not deal with the issue that I have just raised with you. It simply talks about the process that was undergone, all the efforts that were made by our diplomats and other people, and the fact that the P5 had a united system, but we lost in the General Assembly.

Sir Alan Duncan: If I may say so, Mr Gapes, the Committee is quite at liberty to delve further should you so wish. In a spirit of trying to be helpful, perhaps I can say that at the time that we sent this memorandum to the Committee we put in paragraph 10 a comment that it should be considered for your internal use only. I can confirm that we are very happy for it to be an open document now.

Chair: We have had confirmation of that already.

Sir Alan Duncan: Okay. We did it because we had not checked that every single fact was perfectly okay. We were just being a bit cautious.

Q233 **Mike Gapes:** This is the final question from me: have you had any internal assessment in the Department of why we were unsuccessful, apart from your remarks about Asia?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think it is fair to say that that is taking place. I am not central to that, but I am sure that there will be an attempt to learn the lessons, and to work out if we should be handling things differently in the future.

Q234 **Chair:** Given your responsibilities for Europe and the Americas, it is of



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course fair to say that quite a lot of the voting members are nations with which you have a relationship. Have you had a feel from various countries of the Americas or some of the European nations why they chose on this occasion not to support us?

Sir Alan Duncan: One doesn't always know of course who did and who did not.

Q235 **Chair:** Well, it is a public vote in the General Assembly.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is a bit like Conservative party leadership elections; pledges don't always match numbers in the end.

Chair: Not quite: the General Assembly is a public vote.

Mike Gapes: We got sixty-eight countries altogether.

Q236 **Ian Austin:** Which European countries did support us?

Sir Alan Duncan: It's a secret ballot.

Q237 **Ian Austin:** When did it become clear that the usual UK lobbying was not going to work on this occasion, and what did we do about it?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not equipped to answer that question in that detail, I'm afraid.

Q238 **Ian Austin:** Did you talk to other European countries, or to American countries about this?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think in the course of any bilateral encounter there would be a paragraph in the briefing that one would have, which would say to lobby—

Q239 **Ian Austin:** Were you involved in lobbying other European countries to support the British candidate?

Sir Alan Duncan: Oh, if I was seeing a country and was asked to lobby, of course I would have lobbied, but I was not involved in any head counting in advance, estimates, or that kind of thing.

Q240 **Ian Austin:** I am asking if you did lobby.

Sir Alan Duncan: Of course I did.

Q241 **Ian Austin:** And what reaction were you getting from European countries?

Sir Alan Duncan: I'm trying to think if I lobbied specifically European ones on this, or whether it was done at a different level. I do not have all the records in my head. At a general bilateral meeting I would have said something like, "By the way, we've got this vote coming up and would very much appreciate your support." It was not necessarily about sitting down and getting them to sign on the dotted line. It did not work like that.

Q242 **Ian Austin:** It doesn't sound like much of a campaign to me. You compared it to Conservative party leadership elections. I am sure that is



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not how you run elections in the Tory party. I would hope that your canvassing would be a bit better than that.

Sir Alan Duncan: Well, there are lots of things going on at any one time—many international appointments and things like that.

Q243 **Ian Austin:** I am asking a pretty straightforward question: did you lobby people about it?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have said yes.

Q244 **Ian Austin:** Who did you lobby and what did they say? This is the first time since 1946 that we have not been on there. I am not being dismissive of other countries, but Somalia has somebody on this and Britain hasn't. You can dress it up however you like, but I think this is pretty humiliating for Britain. I would have thought that this would have been a big deal in the Foreign Office and that you would have been taking steps to avert it and deal with it. So what I am asking is: when did it become clear that it was a problem? What did you do about it? Who did you talk to and what sort of reaction were you getting?

Caroline Wilson: If I may just say, the memorandum sets this out in quite a lot of detail in terms of the different phases of the lobbying, and there was indeed an extremely extensive and intense campaign, which increased, it is fair to say, in intensity in the last weeks. That is all set out in the memorandum, which details precisely what we did and what our mission in New York did from May to October. Then in the weeks preceding the vote there was an extremely extensive lobbying campaign, involving not just the Minister here but many other Minister, officials and ambassadors in all our posts worldwide.

Q245 **Ian Austin:** I am trying to get a picture—an illustration—of that from the direct conversations that the Minister had. From listening to what you have said, it does not sound to me to be very extensive. You can't remember who you spoke to or what they said.

Caroline Wilson: If I may help the Minister on this point, I have seen some of the records. I believe he talked to many countries in the Balkans and many other countries in Europe. Frankly, there was so much that it is hard for us to remember specifics at this stage.

Q246 **Ian Austin:** Can the Minister tell me three people he lobbied personally about this and what they said to him?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have done so many. The thing is that it was always part of any kind of bilateral—the thing is you are not always dealing with a decision maker, so you can lobby your foreign counterpart—*[Interruption.]* I have probably mentioned pretty well every Foreign Minister I have met, but you are not necessarily dealing with the person who actually makes the decision.

Q247 **Mike Gapes:** On this process, it has been reported that we got only 68 votes in the General Assembly and that India got 121 votes for their candidate. When there is a deadlock between the Security Council, in



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which we apparently had nine votes out of the 15, and the General Assembly, there is the possibility to go to a process that is set out in the memo you have sent us. It says: "When it became clear that there was continuing deadlock between the General Assembly and the Security Council, the UK considered it appropriate to look to invoke the deadlock resolution mechanism. However, the joint conference is an untried mechanism and some countries were reticent about initiating it, and the Indians actively lobbied against it". So even when it came down to a point at which you could have made a very strong argument, as a permanent member of the Security Council, as somebody with a very experienced judge, you nevertheless decided to cut and run, and basically say, "We concede". Why did you do that?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not in a position to answer that question, as I have made clear to you, but I can answer Mr Austin's question. It was Azerbaijan, Armenia, Albania, Uruguay, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, the Dominican Republic and quite a few others.

Q248 **Mike Gapes:** But you can't answer the question—

Sir Alan Duncan: I told you every clearly that I am here to answer the main inquiry and that the memorandum on the ICJ is what the Foreign Office has submitted to you for this session.

Q249 **Ian Murray:** I am struggling to understand the strategy. Mr Gapes is absolutely right. Did the UK just give up and walk away or did you invoke the—?

Sir Alan Duncan: I give the same answer.

Q250 **Ian Murray:** Would you perhaps be able to unpack that for the Committee in writing?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is up to the Committee. If you wish to write to the Foreign Office again on this, of course you can. It is within your rights to do so.

Chris Bryant: The thing that concerns me is that if you have a Foreign Office where everybody knows what the key objectives are in the ministerial team and so on, you are right, when you go along to a meeting it might not be the right person you are seeing. None the less, you know that this is one of the things you really have to try to deliver and you bring it a bit further up the agenda and all that kind of stuff. It has felt as if—partly because of the result but also the way it has been presented—it wasn't quite high enough on the Foreign Office agenda or list of priorities for everybody to be going out there and doing everything they could. Do you think that is fair?

Sir Alan Duncan: I don't think I can answer that question without knowing what the mood and assumptions of the people handling this were, in terms of what they were expecting and whether they thought it was going to be okay early on and discovered later that it wasn't. I simply don't know. Again, I regret that I must say that this is not my field and I am not going to give facts to the Committee that are inaccurate.



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Q251 Chris Bryant: I get that. Let me explain from a different angle. I remember we were trying to get something through the United Nations in, again, 2010. Most of the countries in my patch were not really the key ones that we needed to persuade, but none the less, when we knew a battle was on, we all sat down in a room and worked out who could ring who.

Sir Alan Duncan: Was that a resolution rather than an appointment?

Chris Bryant: It was an appointment. We won in the end but we were quite nervous about losing. We all sat down in a room—all the ministerial team and members of the board—and everybody just went, "All right. This is a lobbying operation. It's like trying to win a vote in Congress. How are we going to win it? Is everybody sitting down?"

I was struck that, when he was before us last time, the permanent under-secretary said that the Foreign Secretary had written to all Ministers to tell you what your targets are—or whatever, I don't know how he worded it; targets or—

Chair: Priorities.

Q252 Chris Bryant: What your priorities for the year are. We are still hoping to see those letters, and I just wonder whether this ever featured in that?

Sir Alan Duncan: As I recall, they were more thematic than specific, task-based objectives of that sort. That is as much as I can shed light on at the moment.

Q253 Chris Bryant: That is where I would push back, in a sense, because I think a Foreign Office that is really motoring needs both those grand thematic schemes and also the really hard deliverables, where you are actually going, "You have to deliver this; you have to get him five votes by the end of the month", or whatever. I know that sounds paltry.

On a slightly different area—this will be my last question—again when the PUS was before us he also said that bullying is still quite a problem, and much as the Foreign Office has really tried to address these issues, especially in some embassies around the world, it is still a key issue. I just wonder what your perspective on that is.

Sir Alan Duncan: We have raised this at board level. Like corruption, bullying is a broad word, and it is only when you drill down that you really need to work out quite how serious it is, at what level it happens, what it means and whether it is maybe someone who is unhappy about their pay who says they are being bullied. Things like that sometimes appear on the statistics in a way that requires quite a lot of clarification in order to understand if we really do have the sort of problem that the word "bullying" implies in its broadest definition.

Caroline Wilson: To add to what the Minister said, it is bullying, harassment and discrimination. There are potentially three things in that, and of course a variety of different things can constitute BHD. As the



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Minister says, it can be about pay scales. It can also be about job responsibilities as well as other things.

Sir Alan Duncan: Not being promoted and that kind of thing.

Caroline Wilson: But that is not to in any way diminish the significance. We are trying to address it. We take some comfort from the fact that the figures have not increased; we have paid a lot of attention to it and encouraged people to come forward. However, we have still not seen the figures decrease, which is a problem. We need to always look at new ways of tackling this, because clearly what we have been doing has not yet been good enough to get the figures down.

Sir Alan Duncan: I have to say that, since I have been a Minister, I have been quite impressed by the priority and attentiveness that the entire Foreign Office system gives to the welfare of staff, particularly in the field of discrimination, diversity, fairness and that kind of thing. I think that there can sometimes be perverse consequences: you make sure that people are absolutely free and able to express any kind of discontent they have and you end up increasing the seeming salience or number of discontented people. One should always assume that it is a problem in order to make sure that it isn't, and one should never assume that it is exaggerated somehow and therefore doesn't need attention. My view on these things is always to assume the worst and hope for the best, and give it proper priority and proper attention—and I think the Foreign Office does.

Q254 **Andrew Rosindell:** To change the subject, but remain relevant to global Britain, surely we need to be seen as a plucky country, confident and bold in the world. That is something the Conservative Government ought to be projecting. What is being done to involve British territories in global Britain? How are they going to be involved? Are they being fully included and consulted on the issue, and can they have a reinvigorated role to play in our global Britain strategy as part of our British family?

Sir Alan Duncan: I like to think that I am the personification of the pluckiness you are looking for in our foreign policy and the way we approach these things. We have a very enthusiastic set of Ministers, and the entire set of officials are very enthusiastic. One of our great soft power strengths is the intellectual and personal calibre of our employees, particularly in the Foreign Office. It is one of our great strengths, and it is one of the reasons that, through very difficult issues sometimes, we are trusted above many others. That is one of our great things.

We are always in touch with the overseas territories. Indeed, just this morning the Prime Minister had them all for breakfast. That illustrates the seriousness with which we approach their interests and the link between them and us.

Q255 **Andrew Rosindell:** What role are you playing as Minister for Europe in the Joint Ministerial Council with the overseas territories taking place this week in London?



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Sir Alan Duncan: I have met the newly elected—

Andrew Rosindell: They are all concerned about Brexit and being excluded and left out, but also they want opportunities. As Minister, are you meeting with the Premiers and Chief Ministers of the different territories, exploring how they can be more involved?

Sir Alan Duncan: The OTs generally are covered by Lord Ahmad. He is the responsible Minister for them, but I did meet the Falkland Islands' newly elected representatives this morning who were over, and I regularly talk to them across a video link. On Gibraltar, I have a very close relationship, which you are well aware of. We put a very high degree of effort into our overseas territories, and particularly those at the moment who feel they might be affected by our leaving the EU.

Q256 **Mike Gapes:** On that point, have you had any discussions with your French counterparts about the French border with a British overseas territory?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, I haven't.

Mike Gapes: That is Anguilla, which is bordered by St Martin, an overseas part of France. I wonder if that is even on the Foreign Office's radar, because clearly Gibraltar is an issue to consider. Perhaps we could have a note on it.

Sir Alan Duncan: The link between Anguilla and St Martin is a slightly left-field question that I was not expecting. I dealt with Anguilla when I was a DFID Minister, but as I say, it is covered by Lord Ahmad. If you wish to ask a specific technical question on that, by all means do.

Mike Gapes: The Anguilla Government produced a paper over the summer that raised a number of issues. I am sure someone in the Foreign Office—

Chair: Perhaps we could ask for a written answer. That would be great.

Sir Alan Duncan: Sure.

Q257 **Ian Austin:** This is not directly related to the issues we have been discussing, but I was just wondering whether you could tell us when you first heard about Priti Patel's visit to Israel and what you thought about that.

Sir Alan Duncan: No, you may not.

Ian Austin: Really?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, because I don't think that is relevant to this inquiry. I'm sorry, but I think that is a totally inappropriate question for a Minister appearing as a witness in front of this Committee.

Ian Austin: I think that Foreign Office relations with other Government Departments—



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Sir Alan Duncan: No, we know exactly where you are coming from on this, and I think it is an unacceptable question to spring.

Ian Austin: Let me phrase it another way. Lots of the stories were full of comments or quotes attributed to Foreign Office sources. You have well-known strong views on this issue.

Sir Alan Duncan: And so do you.

Ian Austin: I would just like to ask whether you would like to assure the Committee that you were not the source of any of those stories. Would you like to assure us of that?

Q258 **Chair:** I think we will move on. On a more joyous note, Miss Merkel—Miss Markle. Forgive me for that slight slip of the tongue.

Sir Alan Duncan: Merkel or Markle—they are both in the news this week.

Chair: I meant Markle. Miss Markle is going to be a British citizen, I hear, before she marries His Royal Highness Prince Harry of Wales.

Chris Bryant: Do you have any evidence?

Chair: I was just wondering if it is you who will have the happy duty of signing over her citizenship as Minister for the Americas, or would the Foreign Secretary steal your thunder?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have no idea, but I would happily volunteer, and if the offer were made, I would accept it with relish. We offer them both our warmest congratulations.

Chair: We certainly do. Thank you very much.