



Select Committee on International Relations

Uncorrected oral evidence: Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2018

Wednesday 10 January 2018

10.35 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (The Chairman); Lord Balfe; Baroness Coussins; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Baroness Hilton of Eggardon; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham; Lord Wood of Anfield.

One-Off Evidence Session

Heard in Public

Questions 1 - 8

Witnesses

I: Mr Tim Hitchens, Chief Executive of the Commonwealth Summit Unit, Cabinet Office; Mr Richard Oppenheim, UK Commonwealth Envoy, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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Examination of witnesses

Mr Tim Hitchens and Mr Richard Oppenheim.

Q1 The Chairman: Good morning and welcome. The requirement here is that, before entering into the discussions of the Committee, those of us with interests declare them, so I, for one, declare my interest as president of the Royal Commonwealth Society and chair of the Council of Commonwealth Societies. I do not know whether anyone else has an interest to declare, but if they have and remember it, before they start questioning they should just utter it for the purposes of the record.

Mr Hitchens, may we start with your fascinating area of work, which is a relatively new appointment? Perhaps you could put in a nutshell what you think the major government purpose is in the considerable devotion of resources to your unit in the Cabinet Office and to the issue of the Commonwealth generally, and later on come on to the details of the proposed Commonwealth summit in April. How would you describe the mission?

Mr Tim Hitchens: Thank you, Chairman and members of the Committee. I would describe it as having fundamentally two parts. The first is to run the best summit that London and the Commonwealth have ever seen—a very practical, operational point. The second is to help to rejuvenate the Commonwealth so that, from this summit through the two-year Chair-in-Office period to 2020, the Commonwealth takes its place once more as one of the significant international organisations. Both those things are part of the mandate that I have taken over.

The Chairman: You have described to us two purposes. In respect of one of them, obviously, here we are sitting in London, in Britain, and interested in Britain's role in this unfolding future. The other is our broader concern as a member of the Commonwealth in the help of the entire institution and the network.

Mr Tim Hitchens: Yes. That is a good way of putting it. It is fair to say that when one hosts a Commonwealth summit, a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, we are not the bosses. It is rather similar to the way in which the Olympics are run; there is a rulebook set by member states and encompassed in what is called the blue book. We have been given the duty and the opportunity to run a summit following the instructions set out in the blue book.

The Chairman: To press you a little, you are a very senior member of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and a very senior ex-ambassador, where you did a marvellous job in Japan. You are interested, as we are and as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is, in Britain's interests and purposes. Can you define our British purpose a little more in agreeing to be chair and in laying on this colossal, uniquely important conference and encouraging all parts of the United Kingdom to play a major part, including the obvious leadership from the head of the Commonwealth,



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Her Majesty the Queen? This is a very big initiative by Britain, so what is in it for us?

Mr Tim Hitchens: I should just note that I am a member of the Cabinet Office now rather than the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, reporting my unit to the Prime Minister. Richard Oppenheim is a member of the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth envoy, and he attends the board of governors, in effect, of the Commonwealth.

If we step back, Vanuatu was due to hold this Commonwealth summit, but in 2015, just before the previous summit, there was a major natural catastrophe, Cyclone Pam, which destroyed about 65% of the economy of Vanuatu. Vanuatu was therefore clearly not able to host this summit, so the members of the Commonwealth asked whether the UK would be willing to hold it here in the UK instead. This was early in 2015.

The Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, said that, yes, we were prepared to do that. He saw that as a way of reinforcing the position of Britain in the Commonwealth but doing so in a way that was being both an active participant in it and a servant of the 52. It is very important that as we host we are very clear that what we are doing is on behalf of the 52. I suspect that I will quite often say "our", by which I mean the 52, because an effective summit, an effective CHOGM, will be one where Britain as host is able to represent the interest of the 52. By doing so, we will, I am sure, advance Britain's reputation and our reputation around the world for being a fair and good host.

The Chairman: Thank you. Can we come to the summit itself and the enormous activity and effort that you and your team are putting into all this? Lord Purvis wanted to pursue this matter.

Q2 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** I, too, declare an interest. I currently co-chair with Minister Enelamah, the Nigerian Trade Minister, an all-party group inquiry into opportunities for relieving poverty in the Commonwealth through trade and investment. We will report shortly before parliamentary forum leading up to CHOGM and hopefully have a relationship with the investment council during the trade and wider elements.

As you perhaps indicated, this is not a British summit of the Commonwealth; it is a Commonwealth summit in Britain. Can you outline a little more the relationship between the UK and the secretariat? There has been quite a bit of press coverage over the past year, in the UK in particular, about the relationship. We had the Prime Minister's speech last year, which highlighted what the agenda may well be. What assurance can you give that this is not a British agenda but a Commonwealth agenda shaped by Commonwealth? Perhaps you can outline what you see as the support of the secretariat, given the press coverage about potential tensions between the UK and the secretariat.

Mr Tim Hitchens: The secretariat is a vital part of an effectively functioning Commonwealth, partly because it has its duties in preparing



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the agenda—bringing forward texts, chairing meetings et cetera. Fundamentally, however, its role is to represent the 52 and make sure that one member state cannot pull discussion in a way that is anathema to others.

We have in Patricia Scotland a secretary-general who came in on a reform agenda; that is why she received the support from member states. She has been delivering that reform agenda. We work hand in glove with her; we could not do it otherwise. She works hand in glove with us; I see her regularly. The Prime Minister and she shared a platform at the United Nations in September. My team sees her team daily. It is very difficult to separate us out. I hope that other member states see material, conversations and initiatives that they do not quite know where they are coming from because it is the two of us operating together.

We see the Commonwealth—this goes back to something that Lord Howell often talks about—as not being different from other organisations because it has ministerials or because it has a secretariat; it is different because it has all these different networks, some within government but some quite outside government. The value of the Commonwealth and what we are trying to achieve is what I would describe as a three-pillar approach. The first is the 52 working with the secretariat on events such as this summit.

The second pillar is all the important collaboration that goes on between member states in any case. The third pillar is all those networks, be they the Royal Commonwealth Society, the Commonwealth Magistrates' and Judges' Association or the young people's networks. Coming to this relatively fresh myself last year, I found that bit the most impressive and the bit that had life and vitality, and part of our challenge is bringing that life and vitality from the third pillar into the other two pillars.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: I will follow that up, if I may. I received a very good briefing from a member of your team, and it has been impressive that the work has started so early. I think this is the earliest start for preparations for any CHOGM. Could you reassure us that at the summit there will be no differences of view of the secretariat on the part of some of the larger Commonwealth members of the family? There are clearly some differences of view about the future role of the Commonwealth. Some believe it is more about trade; some that it is more about maintaining a family relationship on an informal basis. Could you outline some of the diplomatic preparations with some of our key Commonwealth friends about their view of the secretariat, because I know there is no unanimity at the moment?

The Chairman: Perhaps Mr Oppenheim would like to come in on the diplomatic aspect as well.

Mr Tim Hitchens: It would be a strange summit and strange negotiation if there were no disagreements. The strength of the Commonwealth is



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precisely that it has the diversity that it does: developing countries, developed countries, newly emerging countries, massive countries such as India and tiny countries such as Nauru.

Our policy as the UK Government has been to go out to all 52 from the very beginning of 2017 and spend at least six months listening. I have called on all the high commissioners—those based in Brussels as well as those based in London. I have travelled around a number of the key countries. Along with the secretariat we have held joint events, which are fundamentally listening events.

The consensus reached at the moment is that, first, the overarching theme for the whole of the summit will be “towards a common future”: that is, the sense of collaboration. Underneath that, we will bring forward initiatives on four particular areas. This is based on the idea that we are looking not just at the next two years but at the role of the Commonwealth in the 21st century.

The first area, in an environment where there are increasing protectionist pressures, is a more prosperous future for us that involves support from international organisations such as the WTO. The second is a more sustainable future, by which we mean work on the oceans, on some health issues and on climate change. We look back in particular to Vanuatu and Cyclone Pam but also at events in the Caribbean over the summer. The third is looking at the new security challenges in the 21st century, by which we mean issues such as violent extremism, cyber, terrorism and so on.

The fourth is a fairer future for the Commonwealth, by which the member states mean the classic heartland of Commonwealth work: ways in which we can support elections, reinforce good governance and look at tolerance and diversity in our communities. There is agreement on the part of all member states to that theme and to those four particular proposals. Under each of those we are now at the stage of negotiating as 52 which initiatives we will be able to announce at the summit in April.

The Chairman: Mr Oppenheim, would you like to comment on what it looks like from the FCO? The Foreign Office is concerned with our foreign policy, so what are the foreign policy aspects arising from Lord Purvis’s question?

Mr Richard Oppenheim: On the summit, we are working very closely with other high commissioners who sit on the board of governors with me, as does Tim. It is very clear that we all want a successful summit. There is a great deal of confidence from high commissioner colleagues that the UK will run a fantastic summit.

On the question of the board of governors and reforming the secretariat, the 52 of us around the table at Marlborough House are there to follow up on the reform mandate that leaders have given and to help the secretariat to deliver that. We agreed a strategic plan last July that sets



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the framework, and underneath that a delivery plan that sets out very clearly exactly how that will be delivered. That will be looked at again after the summit once the new mandates have been given by leaders in London in April, but that is the mechanism by which we do that.

The Chairman: Before we move on to the next question, I will ask Mr Hitchens to elaborate a bit on the third pillar. There is a paradox here, is there not? This is a Heads of Government conference, you are the Government and you are organising an intergovernmental organisation. Yet the Commonwealth, of course, is rather like an iceberg; the greater part of it is not governmental but civic society, in a vast range of networks and linkages over the entire planet. How will you overcome that paradox and make that third pillar really vibrant?

Mr Tim Hitchens: We will be running not just the two-day Heads of Government meeting of the 52 heads but four other summits. There will be a forum on young people, involving young people; a forum on women; a forum on business; and what is called the people's forum, which is civic society. It goes to the heart of what the Commonwealth stands for: the sense that you have Governments and other actors in modern Commonwealth societies. That is there in the Commonwealth charter.

It is important that those four summits' recommendations and views will then be fed into the main body of the summit. In the past, these have sometimes been called parallel events, which suggests that they are going down parallel lines and never really touching. We are making sure that, first, we are in touch with those four forums now over what they want, so that the agendas of what young people in particular want out of the summit are part of what we are doing in the preparations for the 52 Governments, but also that their proposals are made to the heads so that the heads themselves on the Thursday and Friday of that week can take those ideas forward.

An enormous amount of flexibility comes with the non-government part of what the Commonwealth does. That means that you can reach out to people, organisations and places that Governments might not be able to. The things that the Royal Commonwealth Society can do reach into places that Governments sometimes cannot reach. It taps into the some of the vigour and issues that Governments perhaps cannot reach consensus on but where, among young people, there is a consensus on the way forward.

The Chairman: Thank you. We turn now to the broader question of the Commonwealth itself, not just our position in it.

Q3

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Good morning, Mr Hitchens. I was going to ask you what you saw as the priorities for the Commonwealth over the next four or five years, but I suspect that you have already answered that question by enumerating the four areas on the agenda—sustainability, prosperity, security and fairness—so let me ask you two related questions.



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First, what can the UK do to contribute specifically to those areas to help what you outlined as the required rejuvenation of the Commonwealth? Secondly, although this meeting was arranged before the referendum on Brexit, there has been much discussion of the Commonwealth being one alternative route post Brexit.

Could you say something on that, although I understand that that is not why the conference was called? So my question is about the UK's contribution to those four areas and touches on the Brexit issue specifically.

Mr Tim Hitchens: Thank you, Lord Reid. The UK's contribution will be, first, to be a fair and constructive participant in the negotiations between now and the summit. It will also be to ensure that what is agreed at the summit is not just words but has money and commitments underneath it. Speaking on behalf of the British Government, I am confident that there will be money and commitments underneath it that we will offer. We will become the Chair-in-Office for the following two years, which means that we will make sure that the things that are promised in London are delivered on time, and that, if they are not, people are held accountable for that. That will be through the combination of us as Chair-in-Office and whoever is lucky enough to host the summit in 2020.

During that two-year period in office, there are a number of particular things that we will do. The Foreign Secretary will become a member of CMAG, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, which is the foreign policy group; we are looking for greater activism on foreign policy issues. He will also chair the Foreign Ministers' meetings, which will happen twice a year, and will take forward that agenda. As we will also be Chair-in-Office, the British Prime Minister will represent the interests of the 52 member states and support the Secretary-General as she takes forward the reform process.

Those are things that we will do.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: May I press you a little before you go on to Brexit? Interestingly, the four areas that you have outlined are all process points. I understand that process is important, and I understand the role of honest broker, fairness and so on. After your listening period, are you in a position to begin to formulate what Britain could contribute in policy and in substantial terms, for instance to rejuvenating the security dimensions of the Commonwealth, or to prosperity, which obviously relates to some extent to trade and so on?

So rather than the process points, which are very important, what can we contribute in substantial terms to those four areas?

Mr Tim Hitchens: I have to be a bit careful here, because there is a negotiation between the 52 going on as we speak. I can reassure you that in each of those four areas the British Government have proposals, which they have expressed, and that proposals have also come from many other member states. For example, the Foreign Secretary



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yesterday talked yesterday in the House of Commons about the importance of 12 years of quality education for girls, which the British Government feel strongly about. Although the Caribbean members of the Commonwealth think that that is important, their challenge is often getting boys to stay in secondary education, and they are keen that work is done on getting boys into secondary education.

We are in the process of having these discussions, and I am very confident that there is consensus right now on some areas, such as supporting the WTO and ensuring that every member state ratifies the Paris agreement on climate change—there are now only two of us left to ratify it. There is also a blue charter on the oceans, which is being taken forward by Patricia Scotland and the secretariat, with our help and that of other member states. Some states, such as St Vincent and the Grenadines, have an ocean jurisdiction, a water jurisdiction, that is 90 times the size of the state itself. Other small islands, such as Kiribati, have an income 65% of which comes from fishing licences.

Those are some of the specific ideas that we have worked up. However, I do not want to say that these are British ideas, because what will work in the end will be ideas on which there is consensus among the 52, and those are the ones that we will aim to announce as we reach the summit in April.

The Chairman: I will bring in Lord Grocott on the Brexit dimension, because it is also his concern.

Q4 **Lord Grocott:** I am very happy with my good friend Lord Reid asking the question, although perhaps I would give it slightly more focus by saying that when we joined the Common Market, as it then was, the role, function and effect on the Commonwealth was a hugely important issue in the negotiations, including a number of special arrangements for Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean and elsewhere in relation to the EU.

When we leave the European Union, is it possible to generalise in any way the facility and opportunities that there might be for developing trade with the 52 Commonwealth states—52 being a much bigger number than the number involved when we joined—or could you answer that only by reference to 52 separate paragraphs? That is really what I am interested in.

Mr Tim Hitchens: Let me try to respond to both points. As you will know, Lord Ahmad is the Foreign Office Minister responsible for the Commonwealth, and he has also been asked this question. He says quite rightly that we would have increased our engagement with the Commonwealth irrespective of which way the referendum might have gone, because the decision to host the Commonwealth summit was taken seven months before the referendum, and I think that any Government with this kind of opportunity in front of them, with not just the summit



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but the two years of the Chair-in-Office, would be making the most of the Commonwealth links and trying to rejuvenate them.

The British Government have committed to ensuring that no Commonwealth country is disadvantaged by Brexit, an example of which is the UK's commitment to extending the non-reciprocal duty-free access granted to least developed countries under the EU's current Everything but Arms initiative, which ensures that the world's poorest keep their existing duty-free access to UK markets.

It offers the UK an opportunity to show that it will stay the same kind of country that it is: forward-looking and outward-looking. However, the Commonwealth is a very different kind of organisation from that of the European Union. It operates by consensus, which is a very different kind of beast. Its economic heft is very different, as is its global reach, so I certainly do not see this as an either/or. I remember evidence the Secretary-General gave to this Committee two years ago in which she made very much the same point.

Lord Grocott: Perhaps I should know the answer to this question, but I do not mind asking it and showing my ignorance. What are the structures in the Commonwealth? Could the secretariat have a role in any way in facilitating easier trading relationships between individual members of the Commonwealth? If so, is that activity likely to be beefed up post Brexit, or is it in practice down to bilateral relationships between different Commonwealth countries?

Mr Tim Hitchens: One thing that CHOGM can do is set, at a very high level, the Commonwealth priorities for the next two years or so, or even for the following four years. Trade and prosperity will clearly be one of those, and decisions will be taken and instruction given by the Heads of Government on what should be done over the following two or four years.

However, there are different ways of following that up. The secretariat will be asked to take work forward on some of those instructions. On the trade side at the moment, the secretariat does really good analysis of trade flows, looking at the opportunities for smaller member states to increase their exports to different markets and offering advice on the way in which small countries can access the World Trade Organization, for example. There is a very small office in Geneva, which I think you will find will be reinforced, which helps the smallest Commonwealth member states to access the WTO and become an effective member in it, so that the voice of the smallest states is heard there as well as the largest.

Some conclusions from the summit will inform Governments in their ways forward and in their decisions on taking trade discussions forward and will not be instructions to the secretariat. They have traditionally done both those things, and what they will do on the prosperity agenda is in the hands of the Governments.

Lord Wood of Anfield: Could I just follow that up? It is always unfair to



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pick a theme that is not on the agenda and ask about it, but I will do that anyway.

Development issues are obviously implicit in the fourth theme, a more prosperous future, but what scope will there be to discuss inequality, poverty and development issues? I am struck in particular by the campaign on poor vision, which nearly a billion people in the Commonwealth suffer from and which has a group of NGOs supporting and pushing hard on. Will there be scope on the agenda for that and related issues such as disabilities in the development context?

Mr Tim Hitchens: I think you will find that the sustainability priority covers quite a lot of those things. In the meeting of the 52 that Richard was at, it was the area that we spent most hours discussing. This is the area that most of us want to spend a lot of time on. A lot of the issues, such as development, climate change, health and education, will be looked at.

There will of course be a number of associated events in the week, collocated or dotted around, and I know that questions of vision are absolutely one of the key themes that are being discussed. We know that certain preventable blindness, trachoma in particular, is an area where some very good work has been done in the last couple of years, and one last push could get us significantly forward. Equally, extremely good work is being done on malaria, and one more push could make great strides forward; I know that many, including the Gates foundation, are very interested in that. Equally, the key health challenge for the Caribbean is non-clinical diseases.

Again, the challenge for us as the 52 is to work out what we can agree as 52, and can represent the interests of the 52, that is broad enough that we have consensus on it but that allows very specific decisions to flow from it. Health and education are in that category.

The Chairman: One final question on the Brexit aspect before we leave this issue. Would it be true to say that, long before Brexit was a gleam in the eye, it was becoming fairly obvious in the last two decades that with the world economy moving to Asia, instead of thinking in terms of very small exports to the Commonwealth, which had become the case, we were going to have to think in terms of getting into these giant new markets of Asia? Can one depict the way we are going now as a direction in which we should have been going anyway, regardless of Brexit or anything else, because this is the way in which world trade is heading?

Mr Tim Hitchens: If I may, I will quote from one of your own speeches: in the relationships of the Commonwealth there are not just 52—that is, it is not just the UK's relationship with other member states—but 1,362 of them, because it is a network. One of the things that struck me most last year as I travelled around the Commonwealth was the enthusiasm for it among the emerging Asian markets, particularly India and Malaysia. What mattered to them was their trading relationships particularly with



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African emerging markets. They were slightly surprised at how easily they were able to operate in Commonwealth African countries, because there was a level of trust and ease of operation that they did not experience in some other African markets. They were interested in working out why that was.

That was partly the classic 19% Commonwealth advantage—the statistics show that it is 19% easier and cheaper to operate intra-Commonwealth than in other ways—and partly, as you describe, the fact that the centre of gravity of the Commonwealth, if one looks at the economics as well as the politics, is probably heading towards Asia. I would push back a little on the idea of a centre of gravity, because, as you have said yourself, Chairman, the Commonwealth is a network; it is not a place with a centre.

In Shridath Ramphal's day, he talked a lot about the Commonwealth having as many centres as it had member states. Although Marlborough House and the Commonwealth Secretariat clearly play a key part in holding this fabric together, it is important that we recognise the work and the role of the Commonwealth in all sorts of different places around the world, be that in Geneva, New York or New Delhi.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: My observation is that increasingly it is seen as a network of regions as well, so Australia sees its commercial and trade interests within that region, which is completely understandable, and the same for Africa and Asia. You mentioned the relationship with a rules-making body, which the Commonwealth is not and will not be, such as the WTO. I was in Buenos Aires at the rather dysfunctional MC 11 in December, and it was quite clear that there is a great deal of anxiety from the least developed states at the "my country first" approach and the difficulties facing the WTO with the US position, China and others.

It has been very welcome to hear the emphasis on the support for the least developed countries, particularly those that are vulnerable due to climate change, because their voice has not been listened to in the past. In that regard, you also mentioned the small-states adviser in Geneva and the hubs-and-spokes model that has been operated. Those rules are fairly largely dependent on EU funds. Could you guarantee that that capacity in Geneva and the hubs-and-spokes model will continue after Brexit, or will the UK be in the rather odd situation of observing EU-funded Commonwealth activities while not being part of it?

Mr Tim Hitchens: When the UK leaves the EU, there will still be two member states that are members of the EU: Cyprus and Malta. They are very significant members of the EU. I am sure the UK will want a strong relationship with the EU.

On the exact decisions about how finances are run, Patricia Scotland and the secretariat will be the ones who make key decisions on how they use the resources at their disposal. However, I think that at the summit you will find many member states very keen that the model of having small



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states' offices—be they in New York, be they in Geneva—is critical to all of us. I suspect that the funding arrangements for that will be relatively straightforward to continue.

The Chairman: We move on to our own relations with the rest of the Commonwealth and how they are affected at the time of great change in our foreign policy.

Q5 **Lord Balfe:** This question is probably better directed at Mr Oppenheim. Obviously the Commonwealth is evolving, and clearly CHOGM was arranged before the Brexit vote took place. How have individual member states' relations changed in those two years, and how do you expect them to change? I have heard the Commonwealth summed up as, "Yes, the Commonwealth is different; it has no money". Your previous Minister, Baroness Anelay, talked about a leaner Commonwealth Secretariat. To me, the word "leaner" in admin-speak means even less money. I just wonder how you see the future and how you can deliver it.

I mentioned earlier, before you came into the Committee, that when I was in Australia recently with the CPA, the chair of the foreign trade committee in their lower House said to me, "Look, this is a pragmatic relationship. If you want a trade relationship, you can have one, but we have demands as well. We're not a colony any more". This idea that there are hundreds of people lining up wishing to sign agreements with us the moment we leave is just false. To what extent will the Commonwealth have a role to play?

Mr Tim Hitchens: Clearly questions of trade policy are for the Department for International Trade, and it will have its views on many of the questions that you are talking about. The UK's financial commitment to the Commonwealth and the secretariat remains very strong. We are the leading contributor to the running of the secretariat. We contribute about £5.5 million a year—one-third of its costs, to which we are the biggest contributor.

On the question of technical co-operation, we give up to £8 million a year, so we are the 25% to 30% biggest. On the question of Commonwealth scholarships, we give £25 million a year to support something like 1,700 Commonwealth scholars. That financial commitment to what you would call the Commonwealth institutions is very strong and second to none.

The relationships at the summit and the work that we are doing on the Commonwealth give us opportunities to invest in some of the really big relationships that we have around the world. Australia is one of those; it is far and away our biggest export market among Commonwealth countries, worth £8 billion a year. So there are opportunities offered to us in re-engaging with the Commonwealth, partly under the second pillar that I described.

There are things that we will do as the 52, but there are also opportunities for us to strengthen relationships in groupings in the



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Commonwealth. That will be as important in the long run for British foreign policy, I suspect—Richard will have views—as anything else.

Mr Richard Oppenheim: I absolutely agree with what Tim says. Countries such as India and Canada, as well as Australia, are very important to us, as are many other countries in the Commonwealth. We all want to use this opportunity to draw them closer in terms of the Commonwealth and use the Commonwealth and our relationship with them bilaterally. Obviously, having all their leaders and Foreign Ministers coming to London is a massive opportunity for us to work together.

Lord Balfe: What do you think will actually happen? India, for instance, has proved almost impossible to get trade deals with. Look at the TPP. What are we going to be able to do that apparently no one else can do?

Mr Tim Hitchens: That is a question on which the Department for International Trade will have to respond to you. It is a very good question that is not really in the purview of the work we do within our unit.

The Chairman: Just to follow Lord Balfe's line, the Foreign Secretary has said that "Britain is back East of Suez". East of Suez lies the Indian subcontinent, the whole of south-east Asia and the great booming Asian economy, and of course many key security questions. Do these come into our calculations, and does our interest in the Commonwealth embrace the defence and security implications of such remarks?

Mr Tim Hitchens: I would say that a renewed interest in the Commonwealth, which represents six regions of the world—that is why the symbol we are using for our summit is a hexagon—means a renewed interest in Asia and the Pacific. With that number of Heads of Government coming to the UK and with our engagement with their Governments, it clearly means that we will be spending more time in the run-up, at the summit and in the two years after it looking at those members of the Commonwealth. They feature large in British foreign policy. Certainly, my experience as ambassador in Japan was that the British Government recognised the growing importance of the Asian Pacific region to their foreign policy. There is always scope for doing more, but the Commonwealth allows us to be global in a way that we perhaps had not been before.

Baroness Smith of Newnham: May I press you a little further? As you say, there are various aspects that are for the Department for International Trade to deal with. However, we have the prospect of the Commonwealth Business Forum for business leaders. What scope is there for side-meetings, and to what extent would your role be to facilitate things that the DIT might want to initiate?

Mr Tim Hitchens: DIT is working very closely with the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council, which is responsible for delivering the business forum. Lord Marland, as you will know, is very active in that. My unit spends a lot of time working with it. It has three days of a superb



agenda and a superb summit that will be based in the City of London and near here. We will have CEOs from across the Commonwealth. In particular, a number of very senior people are coming from India, but also from Africa, Malaysia and Singapore. That will be three days of opportunity to engage business to business. They will look partly at the business opportunities that African nations, India, Pakistan and others can have, but also at some of the Commonwealth fairness and equality issues that other member states and some of the countries want to discuss. For us, this is a big thing. Those forums have never spoken to each other. We are making sure that all those forums do a joint day so that the business community can talk to civil society, young people and women and cover some of those issues that are sometimes a little bit awkward and sensitive. It is bringing that agenda as well as the commercial agenda into play.

The Chairman: We have spoken a little on Commonwealth reform and change. Baronesses Coussins and Hilton would like to pursue aspects of that.

Q6 **Baroness Coussins:** I want to ask about the Commonwealth reform programme and what progress has been made towards what the Prime Minister has talked of as “a reformed and revitalised Commonwealth”. In particular, could you say something about how forceful the UK is prepared to be towards other members of the Commonwealth that simply do not share our values on certain fundamental issues? I am thinking, for example, of the number of countries in the Commonwealth that still have capital punishment. The phrase you used earlier about being a servant of the 52 rather comes unstuck when one considers the huge gulf between the UK and certain other Commonwealth countries on issues such as that—I know that some of my colleagues want to raise other issues as well. How forceful are we prepared to be, and how do you see the progress of this reform agenda?

Mr Tim Hitchens: I would separate out two kinds of reform. One is the very specific reform of the Commonwealth Secretariat, which was the basis on which the secretary-general was selected by member states. As Richard has set out, there is now a four-year programme of reform, agreed by the 52. Over the past six months, the secretariat has made every reform that we have asked of it. Therefore, we have had six months of improving performance by the secretariat. There is that very specific reform, but there is also the rejuvenation and reform of the Commonwealth itself in its broadest sense, so that it will be seen more often by member states as one of the foreign policy organisations and tools that we can all use to enhance our soft power around the world. Those are two different things that we do not want to conflate.

On your question about being forceful—this is partly why you have Richard and me—my objective is to make sure that we find consensus between member states. I try to represent for our Prime Minister the full range of what the 52 want, because it is a consensus-based organisation. There will be points which the British Government wish to make



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forcefully, but there are different ways of making points in the course of a week. Some points can be taken to heads for an agreement as 52. On others, we can ensure that the issues are debated, but there may not be consensus among the 52. The death penalty falls into the category of a matter on which the British Government have a very clear policy, but at the moment there is no agreement as 52. It is therefore important that this issue is discussed in the summit week, but the chances of reaching an agreement of 52 are not strong at the moment. That is how we will do it: making sure that there is discussion of issues that need to be discussed, but also focusing on where there is agreement that 52 can reach.

Baroness Hilton of Eggardon: May I press you a little more specifically on this? It is not just capital punishment—a lot of those legislative things are ancient British laws that we got rid of a very long time ago. You mentioned sensitive issues. It is not just the attitudes of Muslims to women or the Indian caste system; it is attitudes to homosexuals in Uganda, which are driven by the Christian far right. Will all these issues be discussed openly, or will they be shuffled under the carpet?

Mr Tim Hitchens: Discriminatory laws certainly still exist in some Commonwealth states; I would probably say that the British Government would believe a majority. Often, as you suggest, they are based directly on British laws from the colonial era that we in the UK repealed 50 or more years ago. The Prime Minister has said that Britain therefore has a responsibility to change hearts and minds, and we will ensure that these important issues are discussed during the summit week.

Baroness Helic: I have had the pleasure of attending two CHOGMs, one in Sri Lanka and one in Australia. I remember that human rights were always a sticking point. Particularly when William Hague was Foreign Secretary, I tried to engage our Commonwealth partners in endorsing and supporting the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative.

Mr Hitchens, you said that there are going to be four strands to the summit, one of which is going to be the forum for women. Do we feel that we are in a strong enough position to engage with our partners for them to actually support one of the UK Government's leading initiatives, or are we in the position we were in a few years ago where we will have to water down the endorsements that we are asking of them in order to take this forward? I am slightly concerned, because quite a lot of countries in the Commonwealth hardly comply with some of the basic needs and necessities regarding the basic rule of law and respect for women.

Mr Tim Hitchens: The Commonwealth charter, which sets out the fundamental values and rules, is very explicit on the kinds of areas that you describe. I have no doubt that there will be discussion of issues relating to women's and girls' empowerment, because that theme is absolutely central. The Foreign Secretary talked about this yesterday in



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the House of Commons. Human rights are at the centre of the British Government's attitude towards foreign policy.

The special nature of a summit week is that there are a lot of different fora where you can discuss different kinds of issues, so I have no doubt that the three-day women's forum will look at some of these issues, and that the people's forum, the civil society forum, will also discuss those issues. They will push those ideas to the Heads of Government, and there will be a discussion among the Heads of Government on some of these issues relating to values and fairness. I am sure that will happen. Whether it will lead to conclusions and language from the 52 that would satisfy you may be another question.

This is a long, iterative process. The Commonwealth has moved over the years to take different positions, summit by summit, and there is a sense of progression. I think we will have some breakthroughs, but other things will have to be left to the next summit and some even to the one beyond that.

Baroness Helic: So our expectations are rather low?

Mr Tim Hitchens: In general, our expectations are very high that we will have lots of agreement on deliverables at the summit—

Baroness Helic: Sorry to interrupt you, but I am focusing on this particular issue. We are the country that leads on PSVI, but we have always had a problem in engaging our Commonwealth partners in supporting it. Some of them have not even endorsed the PSVI protocol, which is now the standard tool for dealing with these issues. I am just asking whether we are now at the stage where we are working actively with our Commonwealth partners in order to ensure that they support something that is a simple, embedded human rights document—although some Commonwealth countries have rejected it out of hand for years—or whether we are just expected to have negotiations and discussions with them and then leave it for a future summit somewhere else. Are we using this opportunity, when we host the summit, to push this forward as one of the major pillars of human rights?

Mr Tim Hitchens: The fairness strand is one that includes questions like the one that you are describing. We will certainly advance the UK's priorities in this area with great vigour, as will the Foreign Office and the Foreign Secretary. Whether that leads to agreements on PSVI that would satisfy you is another question. Work will need to be done beyond this summit as well.

Baroness Helic: My satisfaction aligns with the satisfaction of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and of the Government, so I am sure we are speaking in the same terms.

The Chairman: Summing that up, would it be fair to say that the Commonwealth has laggards in many standards, as we know; that we



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hoped that the Commonwealth charter was going to give a push in the right direction, the direction that Baroness Helic is talking about; that the Commonwealth cannot carry forward all these things on its own; and that there are many groups, in member nations and elsewhere, and in every other country, including this one, to support these causes, but that it is a pressure point that can create additional pressure to bring higher standards and better performance in many countries? Is that a fair summary?

Mr Tim Hitchens: That is a fair way to describe it. An example, although it is not exactly the same, is climate change: the fact that only two member states have not ratified Paris is quite a powerful pressure on them to do the right thing. Although it is a consensus-based organisation that needs to move at the speed of the slowest, the fact that a majority have moved accelerates the slowest.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: I have a quick follow-up question. When we run the young people's forum, young men and women who are gay will take part in the discussions in London. That would be a criminal offence if it were happening in the majority of the Commonwealth member states. I wish the summit well, but it will be the Queen's last and we desperately want it to be successful because of the Prime Minister's imperative of Brexit, so what assurance can you provide from the UK's perspective that that will not be the overriding factor? Can you reassure us that that will not be thought more important than not offending anyone or, as Baroness Coussins said, raising these issues in an assertive way? After all, Britain does not consider them to be sensitive issues; they are fundamental human rights issues.

Mr Tim Hitchens: I would take you back to the Prime Minister's speech to the Pride event back in July, I think it was, where she was very explicit about describing what you say there. I would simply say that she has said that we have a special responsibility to change hearts and minds, and that we will ensure that these important issues are discussed in summit week. That is something explicit and on the record that the Prime Minister put forward, and that is certainly what we will be doing.

Q7 The Chairman: We move on to two final questions. A phrase that keeps coming up in any discussion of the Commonwealth is "a well-connected and networked Commonwealth". There are those who argue that it is networking and the digital age that give the Commonwealth such a strong future instead of looking like an organisation from the past. Would you agree?

Would you also say a word about organisations such as the Association of Commonwealth Universities, which deals with a network of 530 universities every day from its office in Tavistock Square, or the work of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, which links up local government activity across the entire planet? Is this an important aspect, and should we emphasise it strongly in the CHOGM preparations and activities?



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Mr Tim Hitchens: I think you know the answer, which is yes, partly because it goes to the reform and rejuvenation agenda. For the Commonwealth to be an effective organisation it needs to play to its strengths, and its strengths are indeed the fact that it is a network that involves not just Governments and the secretariat but all those other players. The Royal Commonwealth Society, for example, does excellent work, and the work that it has done on the Queen's Commonwealth Canopy, which connects forestry reserves across the 52—that is the aspiration—is a great step forward. The Commonwealth of Learning, based in Vancouver, is a great advocate and source of expertise on distance learning and is a very good example.

The work of the association of magistrates and judges around the whole Commonwealth in making the case for the independence of the judiciary is very strong. If you asked most British people, I think they would say that the Commonwealth Games is one of the prizes of the Commonwealth. The fact that Birmingham will host it in 2022 is a major step forward for the UK as a whole, and I think it will do a fantastic job. All those various networks make the Commonwealth distinctive and unique. They are the ones that we want to celebrate and showcase during the summit week, as well as the official parts of the programme.

The Chairman: Are we, the British, doing enough to connect with the gigantic new network that is emerging across the world and certainly across the Commonwealth? I recall Baroness Lane-Fox telling your Lordships that she knew of a school in Northumberland that was very connected because it outsourced its homework every morning to Singapore. I do not know whether that was quite what we meant by "connected", but are we doing enough to get into this connected system?

Mr Tim Hitchens: There is an enormous opportunity between now and the summit in April for us not just to prepare a summit and its forums but to get the message about the networking opportunities out to schools across the UK and around the Commonwealth. Work is being done by the Department for Education in making sure that every school receives a Commonwealth pack. Work funded by the British Council is being done in connecting school classrooms in the UK and in other Commonwealth countries. We are doing work, which will be announced very soon, with the Eden Project. There will be a series of big launches across the Commonwealth, with a major bringing-together of communities in India, South Africa, the UK and other places, so that that potential in the networks is understood. It is not always easy to get the Commonwealth some oxygen of publicity. The next three months, the next 100 days, will give us that opportunity in spades, and we are going to take it.

Q8

The Chairman: This will be the final question because we have kept you a long time—unless my colleagues have another one. It is about new members, associate members, observer members and so on. Some three or four Commonwealth summits ago, Mozambique and Rwanda were invited to join and did, although, as people pointed out, they did not



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qualify as being part of the old British imperial structure—they were right outside it. From time to time, one hears new countries talking about closer association with, or even applying for membership of, the Commonwealth. How do you see that issue? Will it come up at the summit? Will some that have left come back, or will there be new members or associate facilities of any kind?

Mr Tim Hitchens: An organisation that has a queue for membership is always a healthy organisation. Our last new member joined us in 2009, when Rwanda joined the Commonwealth. Since then, two members have left—the Gambia and the Maldives, in 2013 and 2016 respectively. It is important that that tide be turned. The Secretary-General, when she gave evidence here two years ago, spoke of a number of countries that had approached her and expressed their interest in joining. The country at the most advanced stage is the Gambia, where, following a very good election in the early part of last year, President Barrow was elected. Very early on, he expressed his desire to rejoin the Commonwealth. He contacted the Secretary-General, and extensive work has been done between the Gambian Government and the secretariat to assess whether the Gambia is ready to come back in.

As the organisers of the summit, we certainly stand ready to have 53 members coming rather than 52. The British Government's hope is that the membership will agree to Gambia coming back in. We know that others are interested. There was a discussion in the House of Commons yesterday about Zimbabwe in which people said that they would be interested in Zimbabwe's future. That is obviously at a much earlier stage. As the Foreign Secretary has said, it would be a noble and glorious thing if Zimbabwe were able to return, but the Zimbabwean Government have yet to say that they want to do so. We wait for that to happen. If it did, there would then be quite a process of working through whether its performance was consistent with the Commonwealth charter.

The overall picture is of that tide being turned, of new members wanting to apply and of an increasing number of countries talking to the Secretary-General about this. As she said to you when she appeared before you last time, the Secretary-General tends not to disclose exactly who has applied, because one wants to talk about success rather than about countries in the process of discussion. I am very optimistic that during the next few months and years that tide will turn.

The Chairman: That is very helpful indeed. I do not know whether any of my colleagues have any further final questions to ask, but we have bombarded you for a long time. What you have said is extremely encouraging. I end by saying that the Committee wishes you and Mr Oppenheim, the Foreign Office, the Cabinet Office and HMG as a whole very good wishes in moving forward not merely to the summit but to a new relationship with a modernised Commonwealth in the rest of the 21st century. Thank you very much for being with us this morning.