

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The UK's Response to Hurricanes in its Overseas Territories, HC 722

Tuesday 16 January 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 16 January 2018.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Ian Austin; Chris Bryant; Mike Gapes; Ian Murray; Andrew Rosindell; Royston Smith.

Questions 1-64

Witnesses

I: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN, Julia Longbottom, Director, Consular Services, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ben Merrick, Director, Overseas Territories, FCO, and Ben Saoul, Head, Crisis Management Department, FCO.

II: Blondel Cluff, Anguillan Representative to the UK and EU and Special Adviser to the Chief Minister of Anguilla, and Charlie Wheeler, Chargé d'Affaires, Government of Anguilla London Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Written evidence submitted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#)

[Written evidence submitted by the Government of Anguilla](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Ahmad, Julia Longbottom, Ben Merrick and Ben Saoul.

Chair: Lord Ahmad, it is very nice to see you. Gentlemen and Mrs Longbottom, it is very nice to see you, too. Thank you very much for making time for us this afternoon. Please do not think us rude, but we will be going rather more quickly than we otherwise might, because there is likely to be a series of votes at 4 o'clock and we have two bits of business to get through before then, so forgive us if we are a little pressed. Likewise, please keep your answers as brief as possible. That does not mean avoid answering, of course, but do keep your answers quick.

Q1 **Chris Bryant:** Lord Ahmad, a bit of an update first. What is the state of play in terms of the infrastructure problems following the hurricanes in the Caribbean Overseas Territories? How many personnel have we got left there now?

Lord Ahmad: First, there were three phases to the response immediately, as you will appreciate. There was the immediate response to the hurricanes, and an appropriate number of personnel—from the military to the civilian, through DFID—were deployed. The second phase was very much this reconstruction phase, which we are currently at. In that regard, first I would highlight the fact that, as you probably heard, the Prime Minister made an announcement of additional funding for all three territories, and that is based on their own priorities. They have determined the priorities in terms of reconstruction. We have been working with them, through both Government and the private sector, in ensuring that their priorities are identified, costed and supported financially. The Prime Minister made an announcement at the last Joint Ministerial Council, where she met directly with all the Overseas Territories leaders, including those directly impacted, of £70 million, plus £300 million in loan guarantees. We are very much working hand in glove with each of the territories.

In terms of the wider Caribbean, you will be aware that, through DFID, there were extra funding announcements made to both Dominica and Antigua and Barbuda. We work very closely with our high commissioners on the ground to determine any live priorities. Both the short-term and the medium-term reconstruction efforts are very much deployed.

In terms of military personnel generally, obviously after the initial phase of ensuring that runways were cleared, debris was cleared and the initial aid was provided, the military put in personnel, who were downgraded in terms of numbers. There was also a cross-Government team led by Chris Austin, which helped the OTs—and, indeed, the wider Caribbean—to determine priorities. We are working closely with our governors in all three territories to ensure that their priorities, in terms of reconstruction focused on housing, sewerage and basic infrastructure, are met directly.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q2 Chris Bryant: To be honest, that did not answer my question at all, and it seems to suggest that it is an achievement to spend money, rather than to deliver an outcome. I do not know what outcomes have been delivered by that money you have talked about. I understand there is a press release in there, but it was not an answer to my question, which was: how many personnel are there, and what is the state of the infrastructure in the British Overseas Territories in the Caribbean?

Lord Ahmad: As I said, the state of the infrastructure is in repair. In terms of specific personnel from the military, as I said, we have downgraded that—

Q3 Chris Bryant: How many?

Lord Ahmad: I do not have the exact figures in front of me, but I will provide them to the Committee.

Q4 Chris Bryant: “In repair”—is that all you are saying? Is that all you know about the state of—

Lord Ahmad: No, no. Mr Bryant, I think you are not being constructive. First, I think you should acknowledge the incredible efforts that the OTs have made in this respect. If you were to pick up the phone to any Premier of the three OTs that were directly impacted, I think you would find that they had nothing but a positive attribution of the efforts that we have deployed on the ground.

Q5 Chris Bryant: Which is why I am asking you what you think still needs to be done, what the state of play is in relation to the infrastructure in those places—I presume that you have had those phone calls—and how many personnel are still there.

Lord Ahmad: As I have said, I will provide you with the exact number of personnel. In terms of infrastructure, for example in Dominica, if I may take that for the wider Caribbean, we are working with them through the Caribbean infrastructure fund to provide funding for the roads that were set up; 14 million is allocated for that. In terms of infrastructure, if you have been to the Caribbean—I do not know whether you have visited there or the OTs—we were really starting from basics. When you talk about infrastructure, you are talking about roads, you are talking about hospitals being improved and—

Q6 Chris Bryant: You don’t know, do you? You just don’t know.

Lord Ahmad: We do know. Those are—

Q7 Chris Bryant: Then tell us. You haven’t referred to a single British Overseas Territory yet.

Lord Ahmad: I have already said that this is all three. In terms of the immediate short-term recovery, if I was to take Anguilla—I know the representative is here at the moment—we have had the phone network restored, we have had electricity reconfirmed and the ports are operational. The airports are operational in BVI, Anguilla, and Turks and Caicos, and that is down to the efforts that the United Kingdom made to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

help with their recovery. If airports, ports and telecommunications aren't infrastructure, I don't know what is.

Chris Bryant: You didn't refer to them until I dragged them out of you.

Lord Ahmad: You don't need to drag. I think there was the detail required.

Chris Bryant: I clearly did.

Lord Ahmad: That's your view, but it's not mine.

Q8 **Andrew Rosindell:** Minister, following on from what Mr Bryant has been saying—I wouldn't put it in quite the way he did, by any means, because I think the UK Government did respond much better this time than to previous disasters—if the British people of the British Overseas Territories suffer in a natural disaster such as this, are you satisfied that they get the same response, help and rescue that we would expect if there was a similar catastrophe in the United Kingdom?

Lord Ahmad: I think on this occasion that we did respond very effectively. Julia is here from the consular team, and there were 2,467 people registered and requiring consular assistance. Of those, I think there were 113 who required evacuation. The way that we prioritised those people was reflective not just of British nationals but of anyone in the Overseas Territories. People were prioritised on the basis of their actual health needs, or because they were elderly or infirm. The way we dealt with that on a cross-Government basis reflects the fact that we did deal with the priorities as they were being identified. Indeed, where anyone wished to leave the territories and be brought to safety, the Government facilitated their exit, without any cost directly to the nationals.

Q9 **Andrew Rosindell:** But the point is that if any of our constituencies were affected by some kind of natural disaster, there would be an immediate response. I am not absolutely sure that we treat our Overseas Territories in the same way as we would mainland UK. Is that something you feel we need to do more work on, to get to a position in which they feel confident that if they were struck again in future, they would get the same kind of immediate response and help—and preparation for these sort of things—as they would anywhere in the United Kingdom?

Lord Ahmad: There is of course a difference in terms of geography. That excepted, in terms of what we did at the Foreign Office, 14 different Government Departments were directly engaged, and we had the crisis and command centre operational for 28 days, which involved 200 staff—that is just those who were London-based. In addition, we deployed another 82 staff from across our different consular services, high commissions and embassies in the region to ensure that that response was there. The indication I gave earlier of numbers reflects the actual need that was identified of those people wishing to leave.

On whether we could do more and make it more effective, I am the first to accept that there is always room for that. I think we have strengthened



our governance in the way in which we work with the Overseas Territories. We now have regular reviews set up. Most recently, after the Joint Ministerial Council, we set up particular structures to deal not just with hurricane resilience but with the issues of residents of those Overseas Territories. I feel very passionately that they are British. They are part and parcel of what defines global Britain, and we should do our utmost to provide them with the exact same service that we offer any citizen. Julia may wish to add something on the consular side.

- Q10 **Andrew Rosindell:** Could I follow on from that point first? Why, therefore, did it take Hurricane Irma to actually hit Anguilla before a crisis was declared? Why was a crisis not declared before that, so that preparations could be made and assistance could be given immediately?

Lord Ahmad: The actual crisis centre was operational before Hurricane Irma hit. The hurricane was tracked from 30 August. It was first identified, as you will know, as a category 3 hurricane. If you look at the initial tracking of the hurricane, it was perceived to be hitting Montserrat, for example. In terms of the immediate response thereafter, the crisis and command centre was operational, and the needs were identified by working with the governors and the Premiers of the respective territories. Having RFA Mounts Bay deployed deliberately just outside the hurricane zone allowed us to deploy to Anguilla correctly.

Let me give one example. As it happened, I was attending the Pacific Islands Forum in my capacity as the Commonwealth Minister. We immediately deployed a team with high commissioners there, and I was able to speak directly to Gus Jaspert, for example, as the hurricane hit the BVI. We were able to make a direct operational decision to deploy Mounts Bay to Anguilla within 24 hours. Coming back to Mr Bryant's remarks about what has been done, the fact that Mounts Bay was equipped with the necessary equipment and personnel meant that we were able to get the basic infrastructure, such as runways, operational, to provide additional support from aircraft dispatched from the United Kingdom, which landed in those territories on the 8th of that month. The response was as immediate as it could be. Indeed, a colleague in the House of Lords asked me, "How immediate was it?" I was actually physically speaking to the Governor of the BVI when the hurricane was hitting.

- Q11 **Andrew Rosindell:** But in terms of long-term preparation and having people on the ground long term, I am not sure that we have got that right quite yet. Do you agree with that, Minister?

Lord Ahmad: There are lessons that we can all learn from this. Perhaps it would be appropriate to say what we are doing. We have previously relied on the OTs themselves in terms of how they manage certain elements of the response, but this highlighted two things. The first is where more action needs to be taken. In that regard, we are working very closely with the OTs. This is not just about one OT on its own or the OTs in the Caribbean as a collective, but about other parts of the independent Caribbean—and, indeed, other nations. We are engaged in direct discussions with international partners to ensure that we can identify



HOUSE OF COMMONS

assets in the area—the hurricane season will be upon us again in June—and that whatever assets different countries have can be deployed.

I was very encouraged by the reaction of the Cayman Islands, for example. They had emergency helicopters, which were deployed immediately. I have asked the team—this is work in progress—to identify, with international partners, the OTs and the independent Caribbean, what resources they have readily available. As you will know, the Foreign Secretary convened a meeting during the UNGA session with his Dutch and French counterparts to ensure that we can again work very closely with them. This is all part of what we experienced and learned about how we can respond more effectively and efficiently. I subscribe to the point you made, Mr Rosindell—indeed we can always do better than we did before—but I am very positive about the response we made.

Q12 **Chair:** HMS Ocean took a little while to get there. Is there any truth in the story that she was out of action in the first few days?

Lord Ahmad: You will know from your own experience, Chairman, that it was actually deployed elsewhere. It was made ready and equipped with the necessary equipment as early as possible—indeed, we also helped our European partners in that respect—and HMS Ocean was on its way. In the interim, as I have already said, we had dispatched military aircraft, which were delivering the essential aid and reconstruction that was required in the immediate aftermath.

Q13 **Chair:** So she did not require repair before she sailed from Gibraltar.

Lord Ahmad: She needed to be equipped. You will know from your own experience that before you can deploy a vessel, you need to ensure that it is ready.

Q14 **Chair:** Some of them also need to be repaired, sadly.

Lord Ahmad: In terms of specifics on repair, we obviously had to get it ready for the actual journey out to the regions, but I would say again that the territories' and Premiers' reactions speak for themselves. They were very positive about the nature of that reaction.

Coming back to an earlier point, it was important that the immediate response facilitated that medium and long-term response. I think the co-ordination across the MOD, DFID and the Foreign Office made for a very efficient and effective response.

Q15 **Royston Smith:** Lord Ahmad, the Foreign Office timeline indicates that the Foreign Secretary agreed to the appointment and deployment of a senior civilian representative to work with his military counterpart, but that took a week. Why did it take a week? Why was that not a lesson learned from previous things like the Ebola crisis?

Lord Ahmad: You are referring, I believe, to Chris Austin. I think his deployment was very much on that second phase, to look at some of the medium-term requirements. The immediate phase was ensuring that emergency provisions such as food and water were provided, and those



HOUSE OF COMMONS

first actions that needed to be taken on the ground, in terms of dealing with immediate infrastructure requirements, could be made. That happened in Turks and Caicos, in the British Virgin Islands and in Anguilla.

I met with Chris as he completed his mission in the region when I was out in the Caribbean. Also exemplary was the way that—I saw it directly myself—the military and civilian representatives engaged directly with each other. Yes, as you said, it was a lesson learned, but the deployment of such an individual stood us in good stead to deal with the immediate requirements after the emergency relief had been provided.

Q16 Royston Smith: You said earlier, in answer to my colleague Mr Rosindell, that lessons can always be learned. What other lessons has the Foreign Office learned on the back of this?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, we have had an internal review, looking at how processes can be improved. There are always areas of communication, in terms of how we communicate to those directly impacted. Of course there are challenges of communication. Certain communication channels were damaged during the hurricane. Again, to come back to the point Mr Bryant raised about what we are physically doing, we are talking to private sector companies that are now looking at fibre optic cabling, for example, within the Caribbean. I have raised that directly as an issue that should be looked at as a wider Caribbean issue, so we can start dealing with some of the challenges of communications. Those most definitely need to be improved, as does how we then communicate those effectively to the audience, not just in the territories but at home. Those are areas where we can certainly improve.

What we learned from previous issues such as this was how we could work more effectively cross-Government. Yes, we had an FCO senior officials team—and we have two gold commanders and one silver commander sitting around me—but equally, there is the question of how the MOD, DFID and indeed other parts of Government could work well together. I keep coming back to Mr Bryant's earlier comments, because I feel I may now have answered specifically, although I could not provide the exact numbers.

I am talking about BVI and Turks and Caicos. On Grand Turk, I physically saw one of the wings of the prison that had been directly impacted. In BVI, when I was talking to the governor, there were prisoners on the loose because the prison had been impacted. We engaged directly with surrounding territories. St Lucia, for example, provided an immediate response, moving high-security-risk prisoners to their territory. That was the short-term answer. In the medium term, with the private sector—for example, Serco—we are now working to ensure a deployment of prison staff to Turks and Caicos to meet their medium-term need.

These are just a couple of examples of practical assistance, built on the lessons learned previously on how we can engage effectively cross-Government and with the private sector.



- Q17 **Ian Murray:** Minister, you mentioned budgets and funding. An announcement was made about £70 million in grants and £300 million in guaranteed loans. Where is that money coming from, and what conditions are attached to it being spent?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, part of it is a mixture of non-ODA underspend within the DFID context, so it is not being taken away from anyone else. We also have the conflict, stability and security fund, which is used for such purposes. There is also a Treasury reserve fund for such crises. The £70 million is a mixture of those. The £300 million is loan guarantees.

In terms of the second part of your question, I agree that we need to ensure for our taxpayers that it is efficiently spent. In that regard, prior to the hurricanes actually hitting, I was speaking directly with various territories, including the British Virgin Islands and Anguilla, about how our finances are managed and what other assistance, in terms of expertise, we can offer.

For example, in the case of Anguilla, there is a specific financial adviser that we are deploying to ensure that those moneys are focused and spent in the way that is intended. I pay tribute to the territories themselves, which have been both responsive and constructive in engaging us on building capacity in that respect.

- Q18 **Ian Murray:** Are there any conditions attached to the money?

Lord Ahmad: These are part of the conditions. For example, if there are particular contracts to be had, those will be assessed by specific parameters that we are working with Treasury colleagues on to ensure that that money is spent and the contracts are procured appropriately, according to the rules, which have been set out in the specifics. We are working out the conditions of that. There are quite detailed specifics for each respective territory. We have not imposed those in that way; we work constructively in agreeing those specifics with the territories, and then we will hold all spend against those specifics.

- Q19 **Ian Murray:** Who in the Foreign Office is responsible for the oversight of those funds?

Lord Ahmad: It is not just the Foreign Office—these are cross-Government—but Ben Merrick, who is sitting to my right, is our senior director on Overseas Territories. He works very closely with me on the overall governance and management of that.

Ben Merrick: For us, it is extremely important that this money is spent with full value for money, and that we get the best outcomes for the Overseas Territories. We work closely with the territories on a number of different fronts, whether to do with the rule of law, child safeguarding or disaster management; that is a long-term programme that we have with them.

It is extremely important that we have proper conditions, both around having a long-term recovery plan and when we work with the territories,

and also, as the Minister says, that we have proper oversight, both from London and within territory, of things like procurement.

The financial adviser in Anguilla will be important and will be a key part of the meetings at which these projects are discussed. In other territories as well, we will make sure that there is that independent oversight. I assure you that we take that very seriously, and from my point of view, in accountability terms, I absolutely do as well.

Q20 Chair: On the other sources of funding that you have, are you encouraging the international community to view the Overseas Territories as stand-alone entities?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, our relationship with our Overseas Territories is different from, say, that of the Dutch and the French with theirs. Of course, in many cases, the Overseas Territories have their own legislative bodies, so in certain respects, certain decisions are devolved.

Overlying all this is that, in terms of their strategic positioning, they are part of what defines what Britain is today and what Britain will be tomorrow. In that regard, we have been working very closely through bodies such as the UN; as you will know, when it came to issues around the OECD, the former Development Secretary made very forceful and positive contributions to international partners about how ODA funding should work.

I think that reflects the way that Her Majesty's Government regard our Overseas Territories. While we respect their domestic legislative bodies, in terms of decisions that have been devolved in different capacities to different territories, at the same time, in certain areas of governance, we continue to have oversight.

Q21 Chris Bryant: In which case, I just wonder what decision you have made about Bermuda and same-sex marriage.

Lord Ahmad: I have raised that directly with the Premier. It is of deep concern to us that we have positive traction with Bermuda, and that is an issue that I raised directly with the Premier when I met him just after the JMC. They know of our deep concern in that respect.

I don't know if your subsequent question will be about whether we will impose something on Bermuda, but we are clear on where we stand on the issue of same-sex marriage: it is a human right of any individual. That point has been made in no uncertain terms to the Premier, and he is aware of the British Government's position on that.

Q22 Chris Bryant: Correct me if I am wrong, but as I understand it, the reversal of the existing legislation, under which some people—six couples, I think—have been same-sex married, depends on the Governor signing it. Will the Governor sign it on the British Government's behalf or not?

Lord Ahmad: Our Governor is a representative of the UK and he will reflect the views of Her Majesty's Government.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q23 **Chair:** That's a "No, he won't sign it."

Ben Merrick: We are discussing this with the Minister and the Governor at the moment, because it is important that this is based on the constitution of Bermuda and the legal position. We are very clear that this is an important issue. It has not been finalised yet, but we are certainly aiming to do that shortly.

Lord Ahmad: It is an important issue. I will formally come back to you.

Q24 **Chair:** Will you write to us on that? I would be very grateful.

Lord Ahmad: I will. I think it is important, and Mr Bryant is quite right to raise this. I have deep concerns about what happened there. I think what Mr Merrick has just highlighted is that there is a constitutional position.

Q25 **Chair:** Does the Governor take instruction from London—from the Crown?

Lord Ahmad: Yes, the Governor does take instruction, but as you have suggested, I will write to you on the specifics of this.

Q26 **Chair:** The reason I was asking about whether the OTs are viewed as outposts is that of course the UN's Fourth Committee on decolonisation lists 10 of the OTs as non-self-governing territories. What are you doing to remove them from that list?

Lord Ahmad: I didn't quite catch the first bit of that question.

Ben Merrick: I think you are talking about decolonisation. It is not something that we are particularly focused on. From our point of view, we have a positive relationship with our territories and the decolonisation agenda is not something that we are particularly engaging with at present. As I say, we have a constructive relationship through all the territories, and I am not sure that we are particularly seeking to address that at the moment.

Q27 **Chair:** You are not seeking to address the fact that the UN appears to list areas that we would recognise as free territories that are willingly part of the Overseas Territory network of the United Kingdom as being in need of—

Ben Merrick: We certainly regard the territories as being largely self-governing, as we said. As the Minister said, because the territories are part of the UK realm, there are some areas that the UK has responsibility for, but the territories are largely self-governing.

Q28 **Andrew Rosindell:** That is an extremely weak answer. The UK Government has not taken part in the Committee of 24 for a considerable period of time, and the consequence is that the UK Overseas Territories are branded as colonies still, which they should not be. We should not allow that perception to continue. Nor should they be treated as colonies in any sense. They should be self-governing countries that make their own decisions but freely choose to be part of the British realm. We all want to see that. Surely the British Government should be engaging with



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Committee of 24 and robustly challenging this incorrect status, particularly in terms of the situation with Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands? By not participating, surely Her Majesty's Government is allowing Argentina, Spain and others to hear only the voice against British Overseas Territories and self-determination, rather than hearing what we know to be the true facts of the situation?

Lord Ahmad: On your first point, I very much subscribe to that. We are very clear, and I am very clear, as the OTs Minister—

Q29 **Andrew Rosindell:** Couldn't we send you as our rep to the Committee of 24?

Lord Ahmad: I will certainly take back what you have said, Mr Rosindell. From our previous discussions, you will be very clear where I stand on their status. If we need to look at the nature of our language, in terms of our commitment and engagement, in various international fora, I believe the UK Government should make our position very clear in those fora.

Q30 **Chair:** It is somewhat deceptive to say that they require to be decolonised.

Lord Ahmad: That is the historical term, which I certainly think is unhelpful.

Q31 **Chair:** That is clearer at least.

How much engagement have you had with your private sector taskforce led by William Bullard?

Lord Ahmad: It was set up by the former Development Secretary with direct regard to the Foreign Office. The most practical example I can give you is when we held the Joint Ministerial Council in November, just before Christmas. I was very clear that the priorities of the UK Government should be reflected in our engagement directly with them. I was therefore delighted that we had direct engagement with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Development Secretary as part of that programme.

The new Development Secretary, Penny Mordaunt, has visited the territories directly, linking in with the private sector taskforce. We ensured that they were present—each and every member. William was present as well. That was to ensure that they made the presentations on who they were and what they could do, and equally that the territories identified how they could practically work with them. For example, one firm focused on housing. One of the priorities that has been highlighted to me by the Premier of Turks and Caicos is the need to build housing that is sustainable against hurricanes. It was interesting: there was a stark contrast with the tourist elements of those territories that have had much more foreign and private-sector input in development. They withstood a large part of the battering from the hurricanes. Tragically, the housing stock did not. We are working, in very practical terms, to ensure that we engage with the right private sector organisations.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

If I can be very candid with you, one area we touched on earlier is capacity, and we are building on that with the Overseas Territories, but they require support on how to set up effective building regulations. On a cross-Government basis, I have ensured that our own experiences and learnings on this can be shared.

- Q32 **Chair:** Some of this is down to private sector loans in certain areas. As you say, foreign loans for tourism have been rather more forthcoming than for things like housing. What is the Foreign Office doing to ensure that the loans are underwritten and available?

Lord Ahmad: First, we have given that commitment. I referred to it when Mr Murray raised the issue of the £300 million of loan guarantees. There are parameters set on those guarantees. The fact that the UK Government have put their name to underwriting those guarantees ensures that those OTs will be able to borrow and take out loans successfully, but there are stringent rules that we are imposing.

- Q33 **Chris Bryant:** The loan guarantee moment is quite a key moment for a Minister for the Overseas Territories, because it is when you get to intervene most directly in the finances of what are often described as tax havens. What kind of commitment have you extracted from the Overseas Territories in relation to, for instance, extending the tax base?

Lord Ahmad: First, there is a perception and a reality here. One of the interesting challenges of this week is that this Foreign Affairs Committee sitting comes before Report stage in the House of Lords on the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. Tomorrow, in fact, we are looking at a specific amendment that has been tabled on the Overseas Territories. On this issue of the concept or perception of tax havens, it is about acknowledging that those territories that are directly impacted have made major strides forward under the rules that have been set out and the reviews that have been set up. They are moving forward to ensure that registers are up and running by 2019, which is the date we have agreed with them. They will be accessible by tax authorities and law enforcement authorities.

- Q34 **Chris Bryant:** With full beneficial ownership?

Lord Ahmad: Yes, with beneficial ownership. The issue of contention is the next demand that has been made, which is about all these registers being available publicly. We also need to ensure a level playing field. Recently, a couple of the territories—the Cayman Islands being one of them—were reviewed by the European Commission, and they agreed that very positive and constructive progress had been made, and that there was more progress to be made in that regard. We are working very closely to ensure that the OTs that are impacted in this way meet their international obligations. The report card at the moment says that they certainly are doing so.

- Q35 **Andrew Rosindell:** Do you acknowledge that our Overseas Territories, despite the perception, meet their international obligations? Also, being self-sufficient, many of them, such as the Cayman Islands, provided huge



HOUSE OF COMMONS

assistance to other territories that needed that help. As they had the finances available, they were able to assist other territories and other countries in the Caribbean.

Lord Ahmad: Yes, I agree with that. I gave the example of the Cayman Islands helping in terms of helicopters. Coming back to point that the Chairman made earlier about governance, we respect the fact that in certain areas, the Overseas Territories have to legislate for themselves. The job of the UK Government is to ensure that they meet international standards. Coming back to the point that Mr Bryant raised, this is not me saying, "Loan guarantees—now I can really impose what I like." My view is based on partnership and constructive dialogue. That means you can have candid discussions on what can be quite challenging and difficult areas, but in a constructive environment. Over the just shy of six months that I have been in office, the constructive engagement we have had with Overseas Territories is something that I am very proud of, because it has reflected the openness of us helping them to help, in terms of their own governance priorities.

Q36 **Chair:** You touched on the taxation of the islands. What about economic resilience, and their ability to stand on their own feet? A broader economic base is surely something that we all aspire to. What have you done to assist that? I am very conscious of Montserrat, which 20 years ago was struck so badly by a natural disaster and is still not back on its feet.

Lord Ahmad: You are right to raise that. We touched earlier on ODA; one of the areas that we are looking at is how those rules can be applied. Certainly Montserrat is eligible for ODA funding. There are more exciting opportunities. It is amazing being a Minister for such territories. I must admit that I have been on a learning curve in the last six months. I joked with my wife on my appointment that, having a wide brief, I thought the OTs and the Caribbean would have been a slightly quieter part of my portfolio when I first took on my responsibilities. As for the opportunity that exists with the OTs, I am well informed that Montserrat produces some of the finest natural mineral water. I am very keen to visit—to come back to an earlier point—accompanied by an appropriate private sector partner, so that we can look at developing that industry, to make that particular economy sustainable.

Chair: Excellent.

Lord Ahmad: You sound almost like a headmaster hearing a response from a pupil, but I am glad to hear the word "excellent".

Q37 **Chair:** Minister, I am not trying to sound like a headmaster. I am trying to sound like someone who is supportive of the independence and financial and economic resilience of our islands, which are of such great importance to members of this Committee.

Lord Ahmad: I am fully aware of that. I jest. When I was in Turks and Caicos, talking to the Premier there, while tourism is a big issue, we were also looking at the connectivity of each island and OT. I am fully aware of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the strong support from you and other members of the Committee for our Overseas Territories.

Q38 **Chair:** As you know, the tourism industry is vital to the economy, but without housing, frankly—

Lord Ahmad: Although, encouragingly enough, in TCI, the occupancy rates were up to about 60% or 70% of normal standards for the Christmas period. That shows the resilience of some of our territories.

Q39 **Andrew Rosindell:** We have seen hurricanes and natural disasters in Overseas Territories in recent years. The Chairman mentioned Montserrat; we had Hurricane Ivan in Cayman, and now we have had Hurricane Irma. There is always a possibility of more disasters in the future. Do you not think that all those cases have highlighted inconsistencies in the interpretation of the UK-OT relationship, in terms of our response? You have said that you feel the response this time has been good, but do you really believe that in our response to these situations, we are treating British territories as being equally British?

Lord Ahmad: That is a point you made earlier. My objective is that our relationship with the OTs and how we deal with their citizens reflects how we deal with our citizens. There is, as I said, one notable difference, in our geographical relationship, but if you look across our OT family—

Q40 **Andrew Rosindell:** But should that be relevant?

Lord Ahmad: No, I am just saying—

Q41 **Andrew Rosindell:** If you're British, you're British.

Lord Ahmad: You're British. I'm just talking in terms of—

Q42 **Andrew Rosindell:** If British citizens are hit by a natural disaster, Her Majesty's Government should be there to support them, wherever they may be.

Lord Ahmad: You know I subscribe to that fact, Mr Rosindell. I was merely pointing out that, depending on the accessibility of each of our Overseas Territories, there may be geographical implications that we cannot ignore.

Q43 **Andrew Rosindell:** Should we garrison the Overseas Territories and have people stationed there all the time?

Lord Ahmad: They could be, although it was interesting talking to some of our Dutch and French colleagues on that. They were looking at what we did, which was to have a particularly prepared vessel that was out of the hurricane zone and able to respond more quickly, rather than at having garrisons on their respective territories. Rather ironically, I suppose, those garrisons themselves were caught up in some of the hurricane implications. There is a fine balance to be struck. These are areas that we look at through our colleagues in the Ministry of Defence. That said, the relationship of the French and Dutch with their territories is slightly different, but your point is understood.



Q44 Andrew Rosindell: The point being that the French and Dutch seem better prepared for these kinds of situations, and they treat their territories differently. The constitutional relationship may be slightly different, but as the territories are Dutch or French, the Netherlands and France look after them as they should. Have we learned anything from how they reacted, compared to how the UK reacted?

Lord Ahmad: I will go first, if I may, and then will ask officials to comment. I met directly with counterparts in the French and Dutch Governments. It is interesting; there are different perceptions. They also felt quite strongly that the UK response was stronger. They also felt that they came under a degree of unfair criticism for their response. Taken together, on balance I think our response was good, as I have said. Is there room for improvement in how we work our relationship with our Overseas Territories, at different levels and in different areas? That is work in progress. We are putting in place some of the learnings I have already talked about on how we respond to future crises.

Ben Merrick: First, as you say, the constitutions are rather different. Secondly, we spend a lot of time engaging with the territories on disaster preparedness. There is the Royal Fleet Auxiliary—Mounts Bay, in this case—which had visited the territories. It has a pattern of doing that through the season and, as the Minister has said, it was available. We also do capacity building throughout the year with the territories to ensure that they are able to deal with these things. Although, as the Minister said, the French and Dutch may have seemed to be in some cases slightly better, there was a lot of extra preparedness that we had covered. Clearly, we were also dealing with three different territories, rather than just the one each that the French and Dutch had to cover. The media perceptions may have been unfair on a number of fronts. Julia, do you want to add anything?

Julia Longbottom: I was going to make a cross-reference to the Civil Contingencies Act, and the fact that in the UK it would be local authorities that put in place the preparedness and the measures that allow them to respond to any civil contingency; central Government would decide with them when any further help from the centre was required. In that sense, our Overseas Territories are somewhat similar, in that they are self-governing. A lot of our focus is on supporting them to make their own preparations and have their own disaster infrastructure in place, and stepping in in extremis, when they ask us to, and when that help is required. That is what we did in this situation.

Ben Merrick: That is the case. For example, earlier on in the summer, there had been flash flooding in the British Virgin Islands, so we stood ready to assist, but the British Virgin Islands Government led on that and said they were very happy to deal with that issue on their own. Therefore, our assistance was not required. That is why we very much acted in support of the territories, rather than imposing anything on them.

Ben Saoul: May I add a couple of practical examples? For the OTs, we have some very specific arrangements in place. The disaster management



HOUSE OF COMMONS

oversight committee was meeting pretty much daily in the 10 days or so before Irma struck. If you look at the kind of things we might use domestically for crisis response, the use of Cobra to co-ordinate the cross-Government response was absolutely applied in this case. It met 12 times over the course of the response. We set up a hotline for people to call if they were concerned about their relatives. There was a very large military deployment. My sense is that a lot of those domestic mechanisms that you would expect to see were absolutely applied, plus some specific OT mechanisms.

- Q45 Mike Gapes:** I have just been in the Chamber talking about Anguilla in the context of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Perhaps your officials will look at what I said, because there are some important issues for the future of Anguilla, as it has a border with two European Union states, and the relationship is going to be very complicated. I don't know, Minister, if you have read the document that was published last summer by the office in London of the Anguilla Government, which talks about the UK's forgotten EU border. They are calling, in the long term, for the relationship of Anguilla with the European Union to continue—for example, by having a common travel area with St Martin, and some form of customs union, because they are concerned about the possible impact of oil imports and other costs that they will have. Have you given any consideration to this? I asked a question to the Brexit Ministers and I was fobbed off; they said it was just part of discussions, and that that would be negotiated. Has the Foreign and Commonwealth Office given any consideration to what the impact of Brexit will be on Anguilla?

Lord Ahmad: Mr Gapes, first of all, I am consistent with what the Brexit Minister said: of course, these are discussions. Practically speaking, though, let me assure you. You will be hearing from the representative of the Anguillan Government shortly, who will be giving evidence. A raft of areas are under discussion with her and the Chief Minister, both in terms of the UK's relationship with them today and the practical issues that you have highlighted, which are also, I am sure, part of our ongoing consideration, which we discussed. It would be premature for me to comment on how that will be determined, post Brexit.

- Q46 Andrew Rosindell:** Finally, Minister, in view of all that we have said today, do you feel that maybe we are approaching a point where we need to revisit the balance of relationships between the Overseas Territories and the UK? There seems to be a gap, in terms of how they are represented. They have no voice in this Parliament, so when there is a problem or an issue, whatever it might be, they have no voice. There is an anomaly, with respect to you, Minister. British Overseas Territories being under the Foreign Office seems an anomaly to me.

Finally, I go back to the original point that Britain has no engagement with the Committee of 24. How can we ever see these territories properly decolonised and treated with the respect they truly deserve until they come off this list and are allowed to have the right status in the eyes of the wider world?



Lord Ahmad: In short, I agree that there are always areas where we can strengthen our relationship with the Overseas Territories, but I do believe—this is reflective of the co-operation I have had with all the Overseas Territories for which I am responsible—that the relationship is constructive. In terms of not having a voice in Parliament, I would suggest that they do have a voice in Parliament, notably that of your good self and others who are strong advocates for the Overseas Territories. Equally, my responsibilities as the Minister for the Overseas Territories incorporates just that: that I ensure that we reflect the priorities of those Overseas Territories in discussions that we have; indeed, I have already mentioned that we have a discussion on the EU sanctions and money laundering elements of a Bill tomorrow. I am sure you are an avid reader of House of Lords *Hansard*; there, you will find that I take very seriously advocacy for the Overseas Territories. On the points you made earlier about international engagement, and the point the Chairman made on the issue of language and our engagement through international forums, I will certainly take those back.

Q47 **Chair:** May I have one moment on one other subject, Lord Ahmad? We were very much hoping to receive the FCO's analysis of the ICJ episode in advance of a hearing with you on 7 February. Could you just remind me whether that will be available for use publicly?

Lord Ahmad: I will take that back. I know we are in the midst of our review. Primarily, the FCO has historically viewed these as internal reviews, so that we can ensure that next time we are better prepared. I know I am coming before you in February—twice, I believe.

Chair: You are very generous with your time.

Lord Ahmad: It is always a pleasure. I will take that back. I can certainly tell you that we are currently in the midst of the response. There has been a lot of work done around what happened around that.

Chair: It is very important.

Lord Ahmad: It is. Another hat I wear is as Minister for the UN, and I can assure you that it is something we take very seriously.

Chair: Which is why I was raising it with you.

Lord Ahmad: I look forward to discussing that particular issue with you at that time, but I will take back your question.

Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

Lord Ahmad: A pleasure.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Blondel Cuff and Charlie Wheeler.

Chair: As you will have heard at the beginning, we are likely to have a series of votes at 4 o'clock, so forgive us as we whip through events. It is an absolute pleasure to have you here, though, Blondel. Thank you very much for making your time available.

Blondel Cluff: Thank you.

Chair: Charlie, thank you as well for coming to see us. Royston, you wanted to start off.

Q48 **Royston Smith:** Thank you for coming. We have just listened to Lord Ahmad, and I know that you have, too. What is your assessment of the FCO's response to the September hurricanes, before, during and after the event?

Blondel Cluff: Mr Smith, it is important to recognise that it is a two-tier approach: the response on the ground in the person of the Governor, and the response in Whitehall, with which you are all familiar. We have a very, very effective new Governor of Anguilla, and he has exhibited levels of respect and collaboration that we have not experienced in the past. Working together as a team with the Chief Minister and the exemplary behaviour of the people of Anguilla is why we were virtually the only island that did not declare a state of emergency. From that perspective, excellent. I cannot commend Mr Tim Foy more highly than that.

With regards to the Foreign Office in Whitehall, as you have seen in the press, our reaction was that it was a swift and strategic response. In saying that, one has to bear in mind that there were three hurricanes in quick succession: Hurricane Irma, which was the worst hurricane on record; Hurricane José, which was a lesser event; and, of course, Hurricane Maria, which was also a category 5. It was strategic, in terms of the military deployment and so on.

Q49 **Royston Smith:** Was it clear who was leading the UK's crisis response?

Blondel Cluff: In Anguilla—I am not sure this was the case elsewhere—the Chief Minister and the Governor decided that it would be led by the needs on the ground, and that was fed into the crisis centre. Effectively, leadership was dictated by what was required on the ground, rather than a strategy being foisted upon the island. You have to bear in mind that unlike BVI or TCI, Anguilla does not have 30 or 40 islands. We have only one island. At the widest, it is a mere three and half miles wide. It is 16 miles long. The eye of Hurricane Irma was 23 miles in width and it sat over the whole of that territory—all 15,000 British citizens—for 37 hours, generating winds of 185 mph, gusting up to 200 mph. So we had to know what they needed. We suffered fatality and the destruction of all our key infrastructure, practically. We were wiped out. Some 90% of housing stock was severely damaged, as I said, affecting 15,000 British citizens.

If I may make this point, Chair, we are almost unique, apart from the remote territories, in that 97% of the population of Anguilla are indigenous Anguillians. We do not have the mixtures of the Caymans or Bermuda or



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Montserrat, where a third of the population is local, so 97% of that 15,000 are Anguillians. That was a complete wipeout for a very large number of British citizens.

- Q50 **Royston Smith:** I read the note that you sent us, which I found very informative. With that sort of destruction, it is difficult to say what sort of plans you could have had that would have helped very much. How effective were the joint disaster plans that you developed with the FCO at dealing with the aftermath?

Blondel Cluff: Again, we are an unusual people, akin only to the island of Barbuda. Going back to the bad old days of slavery, because we were not a particularly productive island, islanders were given plots of land by the slave owners. We were told to feed ourselves, clothe ourselves and house ourselves, so within a few hours of the storm passing, people got up and cleaned up their plots of land. That is why we did not look as untidy as other islands. The actual strategy in place was not only good, but propelled further by our own culture and the heritage of ownership on that island.

- Q51 **Andrew Rosindell:** What more should the UK Government do at this stage to help Anguilla in terms of resources, expertise and other support? Is there more that HMG should do at this point to help you?

Blondel Cluff: Mr Rosindell, the very large elephant in the room is whether the Overseas Territories have first call on international aid. That was the shadow that hung over the whole response. Both on the ground and in Whitehall, the FCO and the agencies that worked with it were extremely effective, but it was soul destroying to spend week after week wondering who was going to help us reconstruct. The immediate response was swift and strategic, but how will you rebuild the hospital, the airport, the only secondary school and the only ferry port that people could use to get off the island? The list is endless.

On page 13 of the 2012 White Paper, under "benefits and responsibilities", it says very clearly that Overseas Territories will have first call on DFID funding. Indeed, under section 2 of the International Development Act 2002, there is absolute discretion in the hands of the Secretary of State for International Development, yet for some reason we had to go out to 29 other countries to ask for assistance to help British citizens in the British Overseas Territories. To add us up with the populations of BVI and the Turks and Caicos, we are talking about more than 80,000 British citizens who sat there in absolute doubt day after day, wondering who would help them reconstruct their lives and their livelihoods.

- Q52 **Andrew Rosindell:** Do you honestly believe that the FCO has a thorough understanding of the needs of Anguilla and the Caribbean Overseas Territories in the immediate term, and also in the longer term? Do you feel, representing Anguilla, that it is right that an International Development Department should be helping a British territory? Surely it should be automatic, as a British territory with British people affected. Why should help come through an International Development



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Department in the way that we would help countries in other parts of the world?

Blondel Cluff: That is very interesting. There are lots of points there, and I hope that I remember most of them. First, I do not believe that we fall in the current definition of the FCO: we are not foreign and we are not members of the Commonwealth. Before, when there was the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office and we were colonies—the Chair pointed out quite avidly that as far as the UN is concerned, we are still a colony—perhaps there was an argument for us sitting there. We are members of the British family of nations. Anguilla has been British since 1650, so that is 368 years. We were joined to England 51 years before Scotland joined the Union. I don't think we are foreign. I don't think we've ever been foreign. We may look a little different—most of us—but we are not foreign.

As regards the behaviour and leadership of the Foreign Office, I have to say that the current line-up is very good, but it is Russian roulette. We are two weeks into an exceptional governorship. Who knows what may have happened in previous times? Who knows how long we will have this particular line-up, in terms of the turnover of civil servants and the like? It would be good to have a more secure basis, so we can have confidence not only that people will understand our needs when we express them, and that they are not blocked by the interpretation of whoever may be in the driving seat—whether the governorship or the head of OTD—but that there is institutional knowledge and memory that is passed on efficiently within the Government as a whole. Time and again, my very small team and I have to go through the learning curves with people. We have to go back to square one. We have a T-shirt, actually, which says, "I said Anguilla, not Angola." For some, you have to go right back to basics, frankly. That is unnecessary, I believe.

Q53 **Chair:** On that very point, how easy would you say it has been to access funds from the British Government, the Caribbean Development Bank, insurance firms and the UN? Have you found that education on each level has delayed it?

Blondel Cluff: The stand-out option was certainly the Caribbean catastrophe risk insurance fund, which I believe was set up some time ago by the UK and the EU. It is a very sensible initiative, with an annual premium of about \$400,000. We got a pay-out of about 6.7 million almost instantaneously. You do need funds within your possession as soon as possible when you have an emergency. That was absolutely exemplary.

We simply cannot borrow money. We can't service debt. Again, that is a distinguishing factor of Anguilla. Unlike our sister Overseas Territories, we simply do not have reserves. In terms of the Caribbean Development Bank, it was a question of discussing interest holidays, so that they could recognise that we cannot afford to meet our interest payments on time for certain things. Similarly, that is the sort of scope that we afforded the population as well, bearing in mind that we had mass unemployment almost instantaneously.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

- Q54 **Mike Gapes:** You published the report that I referred to earlier, and which I also quoted in the Chamber extensively last summer. That says that 36% of your capital funding was coming in from the European Union. How concerned are you about the long term, in terms of reconstruction and capital development, if you are not able to access EU funds?

Blondel Cluff: I have to say that I am concerned. We have been told that we would have about £60 million in aid, as opposed to loans. We are very grateful for that—it is the largest support we have ever had in our 368 years—but at the end of the day our main source of sustainable and significant developmental aid comes from the EU. As we all witnessed just a few weeks ago, we are not ODA-eligible, and we do not fit the slot machine vis-à-vis the UK. After Brexit, where will that come from, bearing in mind that this is how we mend our roads and keep things going?

- Q55 **Mike Gapes:** So if we are out of the EU, you will have a border with EU countries. At the same time as the potential complications of that, there is possibly also loss of this funding—60 million, you said. Is that euros?

Blondel Cluff: 60 million is the aid package that has been offered.

- Q56 **Mike Gapes:** Is that euros or pounds?

Blondel Cluff: £60 million is the aid package that the UK Government have offered as a consequence of the hurricane's destruction. We have a much lesser sum from the European Union, spread over several years, under the 11th European Development Fund, I think—I defer to you, Charlie.

Charlie Wheeler: DEVCO is the developmental arm of the European Union. We travelled to Brussels a few days after the hurricane so that we could speak with the European Union and discuss ways in which it could assist Anguilla in the immediate aftermath. DEVCO informed us that the 11th European development fund payments were being processed urgently. That was to the tune of €3.6 million for Anguilla, which was substantial.

- Q57 **Mike Gapes:** You are not getting funding from ODA, as far as I am aware. At least, your document refers to a very limited amount up to 2014, and nothing since.

Blondel Cluff: Absolutely nothing since—not even in the circumstances of the hurricane.

- Q58 **Mike Gapes:** So you are in the strange position of getting money from the European Union but not from the UK Government?

Blondel Cluff: Absolutely. It is a very odd position to be in, but that is where we find ourselves.

Chair: I am conscious that there is likely to be a vote at 4 o'clock, so we have about 10 minutes.

- Q59 **Chris Bryant:** You will have heard what the Foreign Office was saying earlier about the relationship with Overseas Territories. I wonder how you



HOUSE OF COMMONS

understand the relationship of contingent liability.

Blondel Cluff: I think the relationship of contingent liability is insulting, frankly. We are an asset, not only to the United Kingdom but to the citizens of the territories. To label us as a liability is an insult, frankly. I agree with Mr Rosindell—I think you are alluding to this—that the current structure has a huge gap in it. When it comes to having a voice and all our political and human rights on the world stage, our position is deficient. A Chief Minister is not even allowed to speak to another foreign country without permission from the UK Government. We went to the donors conference at the UN and witnessed \$1.4 billion being awarded to Barbuda and Dominica, and we could not utter a word. Nor could we receive funds without the UK's permission, which was not granted. The UK having said, "You must be bound and gagged, and we will look after you", it was bemusing to find that that was not forthcoming. That is an example of our political voice being mute.

As far as I can see, the days of contingent liability are over—and should be over. Perhaps now, facing this whole desire for a global Britain, we should be looking at the birth of a new form of British nation.

Q60 **Chris Bryant:** That is quite a big sentence. It seems that the Overseas Territories are neither one thing nor the other.

Blondel Cluff: Exactly.

Q61 **Chris Bryant:** How do we resolve that for the future, so that there is maximum independence, while recognising that for some of those in the Caribbean, and some of the others as well, it will be very difficult to be financially resilient forever?

Blondel Cluff: I see that, Mr Bryant, but I think there is a tendency to lump us all together. A population of 49 in a remote location in the middle of the Pacific is less viable than a population of 15,000 on the continent of America at the crossroads of so many trade routes. Remember, Anguilla is the gateway to the Panama canal, and 20% of world shipping passes through our waters every year—that is \$270 billion of trade.

We are capable of being viable because we are in the right place. If, for example, we were to levy a voluntary green tariff on the shipping that goes through our waters to help us with issues such as climate change, those things could happen. As regards the current state, we have asked for assistance with poor infrastructure time and again and been denied. That is why it all imploded when we had the hurricane, because it was so flimsy. If you were to help us to get over the line with essential key infrastructure, we would be a centre of British excellence very swiftly.

We do not have the mindset of wanting to be dependent. We have all been given permission by the Premier of Montserrat to look at them and say out loud, "This is a great shame and a huge embarrassment." None of us wish to go down that path.

Q62 **Andrew Rosindell:** Just two final questions, Mrs Cluff, which follow on nicely from that discussion. Were you happy with what you heard earlier



HOUSE OF COMMONS

from the Minister, or are the Government continuing to be deficient in their response?

Blondel Cluff: As I mentioned, the stars have aligned in terms of Ben Merrick, Lord Ahmad, Tim Foy and Victor Banks—the Chief Minister. There is a very good combination of experience and brain power there. I believe that we have institutional problems, however; there is the institutionalised definition of contingent liability.

You have to realise that the non-devolved—for want of a better term—issues that remain with the sovereign power are run by a whole army of civil servants, and I have yet to identify who they all are. We must also ensure that they are all fully accountable, not only to Lord Ahmad but to the powers that have been elected by the constituent population, as it were. We have to take all that into consideration, and I believe that that is the gap to which you were alluding, Mr Rosindell.

Q63 **Andrew Rosindell:** What you are saying is very interesting, but how do we put that into reality? What type of constitutional relationship, from your point of view as an Overseas Territory, should Britain have with the OTs? What changes do we need to work towards to fill this gap and to resolve this on a long-term basis?

Blondel Cluff: I think it would be highly regressive to go back to the idea of non-elected people here controlling the Overseas Territories. I think we need a higher level of respect for democracy in the hands of the territories and their electorates. Just as we had the arguments here about Brexit, having another tier of politicians telling us what to do would be unacceptable and very regressive. That is why I say that it is time to create a new form of British nation.

I cannot answer your question immediately, but it is time that we sat down and started to think about this, and came up with something that was fit for purpose in a post-Brexit era, and an era in which we will face a high frequency of these storms, which will be of this ferocity, if not worse. British people's lives will be at stake year after year. Gentlemen, we are just 146 days away from the next hurricane season, and we do not know if we are going to go through this all over again.

Q64 **Chair:** On that rather striking note, I think we will end. Thank you enormously, Mrs Cluff and Mr Wheeler, for your contributions. We will now go into private session, if we may, so we can discuss what we have heard.