

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The Commonwealth Summit, HC 831](#)

Tuesday 20 February 2018

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Ann Clwyd; Stephen Gethins; Ian Murray; Andrew Rosindell; Royston Smith.

Questions 1-96

Witnesses

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Tim Hitchens, CEO of the Commonwealth Summit, Cabinet Office; and Richard Oppenheim, UK Commonwealth Envoy.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Ahmad, Tim Hitchens and Richard Oppenheim.

Q1 Chair: Lord Ahmad, thank you very much for appearing before this Committee again. It is extremely good to have you here, and we are very grateful for the time that you are according us. This afternoon we are talking about the Commonwealth. During the UK's tenure as the Commonwealth Chair-in-Office, what do the 51 other Commonwealth members want the UK to do as host of the Commonwealth summit and as Commonwealth chair?

Lord Ahmad: First, Chairman, thank you for inviting me back. I am pleased to say that it is now 52 additional members, with Gambia joining on 8 February. We will certainly be taking the lead on the outcomes of the discussions that will take place in the Heads of Government meeting and at the retreat, which will be at the end of the summit week. The outcomes will focus on some of the key themes. In very broad terms those are the issues of prosperity, so there will be a trade declaration; security, so there is a cyber-security statement; sustainability and climate change, so there is an agenda on small island states; and the fairness and broader equality agenda. Those will also determine some of our key priorities.

Within that, beyond just policy, it is a huge opportunity for us to restate the rejuvenation of the Commonwealth. What does the Commonwealth mean? We have touched on that in a previous appearance before the Committee. It is about repositioning what the Commonwealth means to this massive amount of people around the world. Some 60% of them are under 30, so the youth agenda and what comes out of the youth forum will be a particular focus of our attention. One final point on that is education. We want to get a broad commitment on 12 years of quality education, particularly for young women and girls. We hope to achieve progress on that during our two years as Chair-in-Office.

Q2 Chair: You mentioned the youth agenda. Do you envisage a role for Prince Harry of Wales in that?

Lord Ahmad: He is part of the planning around the Commonwealth summit. Immediately afterwards he may be a tad busy with a personal—

Q3 Chair: Does he have other plans this year?

Lord Ahmad: So I hear. On a broader note, we are delighted with the role the royal family and particularly Her Majesty the Queen will be playing in this crucial summit and Heads of Government meeting.

Q4 Chair: There is talk of her hosting a birthday party for the various Heads of Government.

Lord Ahmad: If that is the case, I have not received an invitation. But I am sure you will join me, as well as everyone else, towards the end of the week. There is an event planned on the Saturday at the Royal Albert Hall,



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which will be a concert celebrating Her Majesty's birthday and her contribution. I believe that she has been the most incredible ambassador for the Commonwealth during her tenure.

Q5 **Chair:** Excellent. We might come back to that a bit later. How will Her Majesty's Government measure the success of the summit?

Lord Ahmad: First, in its attendance. We are looking forward to, and expecting, every Head of State, Prime Minister and President to be in attendance, including from some of the bigger Commonwealth nations. We fully expect, for example, the Indian Prime Minister to be in attendance. We are leaving it for the countries themselves to announce formally that their respective Heads of Government are attending. That in itself will send a strong message.

As we have already touched on, it will be on the specific outcomes of the Heads of Government meeting. I know that the Prime Minister, who is very much overseeing the agenda for the Commonwealth summit and the Heads of Government meeting, is very keen that we see specific progress on the issues that matter to people across the Commonwealth: trade, education, security and indeed climate change. The specific discussions and—we hope—decisions that will be taken at the Heads of Government meeting will also be a way of assessing the success of the summit and the meeting itself.

Q6 **Chair:** Excellent. The devolved nations, overseas territories and Crown dependencies have been spoken about by the Committee a lot, as you are aware. Indeed, we have had various meetings with them informally as part of the Committee and separately. How will they ensure that their voices are heard at the summit?

Lord Ahmad: We are working through a specific programme. We are just finalising the details of the engagement from our overseas territories and indeed the devolved Administrations. In the diversity of the nature of engagement that a Foreign Office Minister has, last week I was in Wales and then, towards the end of it, in Gambia. My whole engagement in Wales was very much to bring the Welsh Government directly up to speed with the papers that have been produced—for example, the draft communiqué, the cyber-security statement and the statement around trade—to ensure that we get their direct input. Mr Hitchens, I believe, is in Scotland tomorrow, to have various meetings, and I will follow up with a visit to Scotland on 6 March, which I hope will be a direct meeting with the First Minister at that time. So we are in the process of finalising in terms of their direct attendance at various events. That will all be finalised, I hope, in the coming week or so.

Q7 **Chair:** Could you mention the overseas territories?

Lord Ahmad: We have already had bilateral discussions with them. I have used previous engagements through the Joint Ministerial Council, and we will very much share the papers we have seen with them to ensure that their priorities are reflected, particularly on the issues of small island states, climate change and sustainability. We will talk directly to them, and



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I will be meeting with the overseas territories' representatives very shortly. Indeed, I met one of them—from Anguilla—only last week to ensure that these priorities are understood.

- Q8 **Andrew Rosindell:** I welcome the fact that so much is being done for CHOGM. This is a great opportunity for the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. But, as you will know, there is a feeling in the Commonwealth that Britain has neglected the relationship with those countries. William Hague famously said that he wanted to “put the ‘C’ back into the FCO.” Has that really happened since? Since the Brexit referendum, do you feel that Her Majesty’s Government are now going to take this seriously and try to rekindle that relationship that was important to our past and, it is becoming increasingly clear, will be even more important to our future?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, I agree with you. I have said this before: I think we have neglected it. There have been other priorities, but there is a huge opportunity in front of us. In terms of the priorities that Her Majesty’s Government is giving us, as the Minister who carries the “C” not only in the broader title but in his specific title as well, much of my work over the last few months has been spent really energising my teams and the officials around me within the context of the Foreign Office to ensure we give this the priority it deserves in terms of the opportunities it offers.

Perhaps the best way of answering your question is this: the person who is overseeing this event overall is the Prime Minister herself. She is overseeing the arrangements, and she is overseeing the programme, and the appointment of Mr Hitchens as chief executive demonstrates a cross-Whitehall approach to this. The inter-ministerial group, jointly chaired by the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary, engages every part of Government: the International Development Secretary and—we have talked about the devolved Administrations—the Secretaries of State for Wales, Scotland and indeed Northern Ireland are all present, as are DEFRA Ministers. So it is very much a cross-Whitehall approach to ensure that the priorities I have touched on—the four themes—get not only the buy-in of Government Departments but the delivery, which is very much part and parcel of the Government Departments. I hope that highlights the approach we are taking.

- Q9 **Andrew Rosindell:** But what is the clear message about global Britain that the UK intends to project at CHOGM to other Heads of State from the Commonwealth?

Lord Ahmad: That we have a common future, that we are building on the issues that matter and that this is an opportunity to strengthen our trade ties. If you look at the ONS statistics, about 9% of our trade is currently within the context of the Commonwealth. Given the opportunities it presents, such as common legal systems and common frameworks for education, I think there are huge opportunities to leverage it. For example, the business forum will be a key opportunity. We are bringing together not just Government players but the private sector, and we are challenging and taking on some of the issues that matter.



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If you are one of those Caribbean countries that has been practically disabled at times through the de-risking of banks, we will ensure that that subject is talked about. That is just one example. If you are a small island state, it is about the issue of climate change, of ensuring a rapid response and of building greater sustainability in your own industries—for example in fishing and the marine area—the issue of oceans. Those things are relevant not just to us as the United Kingdom. There is a partnership approach to ensure the agenda is reflected. The key issues that we talk about globally are very much reflected in the Commonwealth agenda.

- Q10 Andrew Rosindell:** Presumably the removal of tariffs following our departure from the EU will mean that trade with some of those countries is going to be even more likely to generate wealth for those countries and prosperity for the UK.

Lord Ahmad: Our role within the context of the Commonwealth is as a partner—I emphasise that word deliberately. Some of this will be about trade. I alluded earlier to the fact that I have just returned from Gambia. I think there are opportunities for trade there, but we must also look at how we can help governance, justice systems and the broader establishment of human rights within emerging constitutions. Those are much broader opportunities. I certainly believe—this is certainly believed across Government—that the UK will have a key role in that. This is not just from a trading perspective; there are much broader co-operation opportunities available.

- Q11 Andrew Rosindell:** Going back briefly to the Chairman's comments, do you consider the overseas territories and Crown dependencies to be part of the Commonwealth?

Lord Ahmad: They are part of global Britain; they are part of the Commonwealth—

- Q12 Andrew Rosindell:** But are they part of the Commonwealth? Do they have any formal status or role, or are they just notified of things and kept in the loop? Are they actually given proper respect as self-governing territories?

Lord Ahmad: The short answer to your second question is that we respect that they are self-governing. That point has been made to them repeatedly. I am sure that if you were to ask them, they would reflect that the response they get from the Foreign Office and their engagement with Government are positive. In terms of their direct representation at the Commonwealth, there is only one type of membership of the Commonwealth, which is full status as a member state, and they are not that. As I said earlier in answer to the Chairman's question, we are looking at how we can ensure they engage in various elements of the Commonwealth programme.

- Q13 Andrew Rosindell:** Could you give some kind of assurance that HMG will do a lot more to promote the idea of allowing territories and dependencies to have some status? There are 31 external territories in the Commonwealth that have no status at the moment but should have



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some kind of status. Otherwise, they are always going to be considered secondary to the core nation states of the Commonwealth.

Lord Ahmad: First and foremost, I want to evaluate—as I said, we are in the midst of finalising some of these processes—how we can reflect their status within the UK family, as part of global Britain and as part of the delegation. That is something I am currently evaluating. Formally, we haven't come to a final decision in that respect. They are all preparing for the Commonwealth games at the moment—they participate fully in that—but their engagement has to be beyond just competing in that keynote sports event. I am looking at how we can engage directly with them not just before and after the summit but by ensuring there is a bridge with them during the summit.

Q14 **Ian Murray:** How much involvement has the Department for International Trade had on the CHOGM programme and in the discussion that will happen there?

Lord Ahmad: They are directly involved. As I said, there is an inter-ministerial group. The previous Secretary of State and the current Secretary of State have played an integral role in establishing some of the key priorities that will be discussed at the Commonwealth summit. I mentioned the issue of girls' education and the empowerment of 12 years of quality education. That is something that the Department for International Development is very much leading on.

Q15 **Ian Murray:** Does the Foreign Office or the Department for International Trade have a key performance indicator of how many trade deals they would like to progress, or indeed provisionally sign, as a result of CHOGM?

Lord Ahmad: We are not setting any specific target, but CHOGM provides a huge opportunity. As I alluded to earlier, there is the business forum, which will start on the Monday evening. That will be, as you will see once the details are published, quite wide ranging in terms of private sector engagement. We are hoping that through the bilateral discussions that will take place, there will be huge opportunities—if not to sign trade deals, to start those trade discussions where they have not yet begun. We are not setting any particular target, but there are huge opportunities for us.

Q16 **Royston Smith:** Minister, is the Commonwealth more important to the UK post-Brexit? If that is the case, have we been neglecting our Commonwealth friends as a result of our EU membership?

Lord Ahmad: Post-Brexit, the European Union will be an important trading partner for us. Our relationship with Europe will be important.

I also believe that of the Commonwealth. I have already stated to the Committee, not once, but on several occasions—I have been candid in saying this—that I believe we have under-leveraged our relationship. We have not availed ourselves of the opportunities that the Commonwealth offers. As we position global Britain, the opportunities of our new relationship with the European Union, and our extended and strengthened relationship with the Commonwealth family, will be important trading



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relationships, as well as other relationships, be it in terms of education or security.

I would not put one ahead of the other. They will be valued relationships, both with our current European partners in the new relationship we will have with the EU, but also with the huge opportunity to leverage what the Commonwealth presents. Had the decision of the British people been different, we would still today be hosting the Commonwealth summit, because of what happened with the cyclone that hit Vanuatu. We were asked, I believe at the Malta summit, to then step in and take the lead on hosting this summit. We would have been hosting this particular summit and Heads of Government meeting irrespective.

We can talk hypotheticals here, but I believe that the passion and vigour—of which I can certainly speak for myself; I am sure I reflect that of other colleagues across Government—would have been much the same had the decision gone the other way.

- Q17 Royston Smith:** You very skilfully skirted around my question, I think. I will rephrase it, if I may. Did we neglect friends in the Commonwealth as a result of our EU membership? It will have been before your time, Lord Ahmad, so you do not necessarily have to defend it.

Lord Ahmad: I have said that I believe we have not paid attention to our Commonwealth relationships. Whether that was a result of our membership of the EU is a difficult question to answer. I do think that we have to look forward. In our new relationship with the European Union and the opportunities the Commonwealth offers, when you see the facts, the framework of what is on the table with the Commonwealth is huge.

- Q18 Chair:** You sort of outlined there some ideas on global Britain, but do you think there is a chance that the FCO might publish its outline view of what global Britain means before the summit, so that this may sit in context? We have asked them.

Lord Ahmad: I thought I had articulated that for me global Britain—as I have already alluded to—is a different but renewed relationship with the European Union and a reinvigorated Commonwealth. Where the United Kingdom has often led the way on important issues such as security, it will continue to. Those will be reflected on our Commonwealth agenda and in the relationship we have with the EU. Indeed, when I was last before the Committee, we talked about the context of the United Nations as well. We will continue to play leading roles, be it at the United Nations or through NATO. That is all part of the global Britain story.

Chair: Minister, you have spoken about this in glowing terms on several occasions. It would be great to have a strategy—or at least a plan, or something that is written down. It would be a great joy to this Committee and, I hope, to our allies who wish to play their part within it, to have some understanding of what we are actually intending to do so that they can shape—if they wish to—their own actions to fit in with it.

- Q19 Royston Smith:** Mr Hitchens told the House of Lords International



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Relations Committee that one of the aims of this summit and future summits was to make the Commonwealth a significant international organisation again. If that is the case, what resources are you devoting to ensure that the Commonwealth will become a significant international organisation again?

Lord Ahmad: If I may, Mr Smith, I have the great advantage of having Mr Hitchens sitting to my right so I would ask him to take that question.

Tim Hitchens: In terms of resources, we have a very substantial unit sitting in the Cabinet Office working for the Prime Minister in preparation for the summit, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is making preparations to take forward the agenda of Commonwealth relations in general after the summit has happened. We clearly will have a reinforced team looking after the Commonwealth for certainly the next two years of the Chair-in-Office period; beyond that, I am confident that we will have a reinforced team in place as well. Those are probably questions for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office because those are their resources, but that is certainly the ambition of the promise.

Lord Ahmad: If I may add to that, I think it was exactly right to take a centralised approach where we have the Prime Minister very much leading on the summit, on the issues and on the policy themes, and having that specialist team from across Government. It is certainly our intention from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that after the summit, for the two years as Chair-in-Office, we will not suddenly let everyone go.

While the team will be repositioned back in the FCO, we will ensure that there are representatives in that respect from the different Departments, and indeed that our resourcing has already been looked at. Mr Oppenheim is the Commonwealth envoy from the Foreign Office and he has already been working in this respect on that very agenda. If I may, Mr Smith, I would just ask Mr Oppenheim to answer.

Richard Oppenheim: On the inter-ministerial group that the Minister talked about earlier: we envisage that continuing. There is a steering board that sits underneath that, and that involves senior officials. We would envisage that continuing for the two years, and certainly continuing after the summit. There would be to guide work across Whitehall on Commonwealth issues.

I will be moving on, but we expect the Foreign Office team after the summit to be led by my successor as envoy. They will sit in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and will be very much taking a cross-Government approach as the Minister just outlined. We are currently looking at the detailed options for how to do that, and the specific numbers in terms of the team. I am confident that it will be a strong team and that there will also be a team based in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office responsible for implementing and overseeing the UK's funding programmes for the two-year period as well.

Q20 **Royston Smith:** So that is an extra resource, which we did not have



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before, that is dedicated to our future relationship with Commonwealth countries post-Brexit.

Do you get a sense, Lord Ahmed, that any of those heads of Commonwealth states look to this country now and say something along the lines of, "We haven't had as close a relationship with you for the last 40 years, and now you are putting lots of resources into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to spend more time trying to trade with Commonwealth countries"? Many of us believed we should have been doing that anyway, and that we have neglected those countries. Do you get any sense that any of those leaders say to you or to anyone else, "This is a bit late in the day"?

Lord Ahmad: Not at all. First of all, on a slightly lighter note, I am of course delighted by any additional resources that the Foreign and Commonwealth gets and it reflects the importance that the Government is attaching to that. I would add that through the creation of, for example, the Department for International Trade they are also engaged on the agenda of strengthening our ties within the Commonwealth context.

I have had a lot of engagement over the last seven, eight months since I have been in this role, and no one has talked to me in negative terms about our historic relationship. If anything, it has been a bullish outlook on where we are today and the opportunities that lie ahead. I could talk about large states such as India, where I visited and we had specific discussions on a range of different issues, including cyber-security and trade.

There have also been discussions with the small Pacific island states where there are issues of climate change. All of them very much regard the UK's role as a key one and a pivotal one within the context of the Commonwealth family. I have not experienced negativity in the exchanges that I have had directly with different member states across the Commonwealth, and I would be upfront with you.

Q21 Ian Murray: There is no doubt, Minister, that the Commonwealth is incredibly important, particularly in a post-Brexit world. We had the Permanent Under-Secretary in front of the Committee in November. He indicated that it was not a priority at all. In fact, he talked about China, the US and the EU as his top three priorities, and then the neighbourhood of the UK, including the Middle East. Do you disagree with the Permanent Under-Secretary, or is it the case that the Commonwealth has just become more important because of the Commonwealth summit?

Lord Ahmad: I don't think the Commonwealth has just become important. I will read his submission in more detail again. I have already alluded to the focus. When you look at the facts on the ground, for example, the level of trade that we currently do with our Commonwealth partners, compared with the potential that the Commonwealth offers, is unacceptable.

There are huge opportunities. I personally believe, and feel very strongly, that the Commonwealth, through my direct engagement with various



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Commonwealth countries, offers a raft of opportunities, which we need to leverage. Equally, as I have already indicated in the context of the EU, you have mentioned some of the other regions. Those are all vital trading relationships for one reason or another.

They are vital trading relationships based around development, perhaps around education. So, there is a variety of different relationships we have across the world, but I do think that the Commonwealth one has been under-leveraged. It has not been looked at in a focused and structured way. It is certainly my intention that the momentum that we have built to date should continue after the summit.

Q22 Ian Murray: So, in your view it should have a far greater importance than perhaps the Permanent Under-Secretary has given it.

Lord Ahmad: As I said, I will certainly look at his comments again. I do believe that the Commonwealth, in terms of potential across the four areas I have alluded to, presents huge opportunities for us.

Q23 Chair: Forgive me for picking this up, but it is interesting that the Commonwealth is not one of the FCO's top three priorities. It is also worth noting, out of interest, that the French spend more on the Francophonie than we spend on the Commonwealth. They certainly do not make quite such a big fuss over it—I would argue rightly, because the Commonwealth offers a great deal more. The very fact that the French spend €85 million and we spend somewhat less than that in pounds is really quite telling, wouldn't you say?

Lord Ahmad: We have different expense. Obviously, we pay our membership fee to the Commonwealth and there is the voluntary contribution, so that membership fee is in the region of £5.4 million. Then we pay an additional technical assistance.

Q24 Chair: About £50 million, exactly, but that is still significantly less.

Lord Ahmad: And then there is the educational grant. But I agree with you, Mr Chairman. I think our relationship with the Commonwealth is not just about how much money we give to it as an institution. If I may, with the bilateral relationships there will be in my view opportunities when we look at the Commonwealth. It is not a UN or an EU. The biggest advantage the Commonwealth has is that it is a network.

There will be occasions within the context of the Commonwealth where two countries move together, be it on trade, education or development. There will be other times when a collection of countries move together on a particular agenda; when it comes to the issues of the summit and the CHOGM, the 53 nations have to agree on a common agenda. That is the strength of the Commonwealth.

Where I think the opportunities lie is when you have these common systems, languages and structures. That is where I think a lot of our opportunities are. It is in terms of the potential the Commonwealth offers.

Q25 Chair: Given that you have spoken about increased resources to the



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Commonwealth, and we have seen absolutely no evidence of increased resources to the Foreign Office, who is losing out? Where are you taking those from?

Lord Ahmad: No, this is the Cabinet Office team we've talked about that currently sits within the Cabinet Office, which has been created for the Commonwealth summit and planning.

Q26 **Chair:** Is it coming under the Cabinet Office budget?

Lord Ahmad: It is within the Cabinet Office at the moment.

Q27 **Chair:** And they are paying for it.

Lord Ahmad: Yes, that is being looked after. That team has been drawn from specialists, including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, who have been based in a central team under Mr Hitchens's direction, directly at the Cabinet Office. I think that was the right approach.

What will happen after the summit? A lot of their work was also about planning the summit, the logistics and operations. As you can imagine, that takes up a fair deal of time. That will move back to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office but the intention is to retain and sustain the experience and expertise that we have built up from other Departments, who will have representation.

Q28 **Chair:** You will make the decision then on who to strip out in favour of the Commonwealth at a later date. Or do you think the Cabinet Office will keep paying after the secretariat chairmanship has moved on?

Lord Ahmad: I will just ask Richard to come in on this as well, because the planning is that the resourcing and the people will move to the FCO, and any associated budgets and related costs will be looked at as well. And in terms of our priorities—

Q29 **Chair:** So you are hoping for an uplift, actually—that is what you are saying. You are hoping the Cabinet Office will donate the extra resource that they have got to the Foreign Office, in an act of generosity—

Richard Oppenheim: The idea is that the team is bigger than it was before the summit in the Foreign Office, and the resources for that are now being looked at. There are a number of bids that the Foreign Office is making to the Treasury where this is included. So we are still waiting for the outcome of those, and we are also looking at our own budget in the Foreign Office and how this fits in with that. That is why I said that at the moment the detailed options are being looked at.

Q30 **Chair:** Forgive me, Minister, but we are extremely concerned and we raise this with the question of the reallocation of priorities to Europe, because it did appear that there was a bit of robbing Peter to play Paul, which, frankly, given that we are intending to build a global Britain, rather concerned this Committee. And we are just concerned that we are seeing that again.

By the way, we agree with you. I think that, broadly speaking, prioritising



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the Commonwealth is an extremely important thing to do, so we are not questioning your priority, nor indeed are we questioning the spending on it. We are just concerned that you will strip out another important relationship in order to do it, when actually you require extra resources for it.

Lord Ahmad: In terms of the extra resources, as Mr Oppenheim has said we are already putting in extra bids. In terms of the people themselves, they will be the specialists. As I said, there is a lot of momentum that has been built up and a lot of expertise, and we do not want to lose that. As you can appreciate, it is optimum that we leverage that. In terms of the budgets, as Mr Oppenheim said we have made various bids; the outcomes of those are still awaited.

Q31 **Ian Murray:** An indication of the strength of the Government's role with the importance of the Commonwealth will be whether or not the Treasury gives the Foreign Office more money, because in essence you will have no more staff.

Lord Ahmad: There is a cost. If I understand you, you are saying that we can only do what we are doing, unless the Treasury gives us the additional money—

Q32 **Ian Murray:** But you're saying that unless you need to rob Peter more to pay Paul, which is what's happened with the re-emphasis on the EU post-Brexit, if the Commonwealth is as much of a priority as you're stating it is—I have no reason to doubt that—a good way of Her Majesty's Government to demonstrate the Commonwealth's importance is to give the Foreign Office more money to help with those relations.

Lord Ahmad: And as I have said already—it is also the point that Mr Oppenheim made—we have certainly made bids in that respect. This isn't about trade-offs. This is about ensuring that we continue with the momentum we've built up to the summit, and that for our two years in office—as Chair—we also have the resources available to us at the Foreign Office, to be able to deliver as Chair-in-Office, in terms of our role and in terms of the resources. As I have already said and as Mr Oppenheim has said, we have made bids accordingly.

Q33 **Ian Murray:** May I very briefly ask a question that is slightly at a tangent? What relationship do you have at the moment with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which is obviously key to the relationship building? I was in the Gambia with the CPA earlier this year and they were very keen to get back into the Commonwealth, so they will be very pleased that that has happened.

What discussion have you had with the CPA about the role it is playing and whether or not it has the appropriate resources to do the job that they need to do for the summer and beyond?

Lord Ahmad: On that, Mr Murray, I have met both the respective chairmen of the two organisations—the chair of the international, as well as the chair of UK. Indeed, I will address the opening session next week of the CPA. So I have been working very closely with them on the agenda.



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We have been exchanging a lot of detailed information in that respect, as well. And I am also hoping that part of the outcomes that will be taken forward at next week's event will also be reflected as part of the discussions at the Commonwealth summit. So the relationship is a close one. Indeed, it was one of the early meetings I sought with the CPA when I took on this role.

- Q34 **Andrew Rosindell:** Minister, I have raised this with you before, but in terms of the wider opportunities here, has there been any consideration about perhaps inviting as guests of the UK Government representatives of Ireland? Although they are not in the Commonwealth and are not intending to join, I think that having representatives as observers—for them to come along and take part—would be an enormously important gesture to our friends in Ireland, who have huge historical connections with all parts of the Commonwealth. Is this not a good opportunity to invite them to send observers, in order to engage with our friends in the Republic of Ireland?

Lord Ahmad: First, looking forward in terms of ambition, the fact is that we have just seen another country join the Commonwealth. This issue—to make it relevant to its current members and to have new members wishing to join—presents an opportunity. As you will appreciate, Mr Rosindell, this is not our decision alone. This needs to be agreed by 52 others, including the secretariat. There is only one category of attendance at the moment, but that is not—

- Q35 **Andrew Rosindell:** Some of the peripheral events, some of the extras—participating in certain things? Is there no opportunity for Her Majesty's Government to offer that opportunity?

Lord Ahmad: Coming back to a point we raised earlier about the devolved Administrations and the overseas territories, I certainly think that within that context there is a role for Her Majesty's Government. When we talk about other sovereign countries beyond the UK family, that is a different question and something that would need to be agreed by all Commonwealth countries.

- Q36 **Chris Bryant:** I'm a bit more sceptical if I'm honest. Politics is about making choices and choosing priorities. You will correct me if I'm wrong about these figures, but if you add up all the trade of all the Commonwealth countries in the world with the UK, it does not amount to the same as Spain, France and Germany.

Lord Ahmad: You are correct.

- Q37 **Chris Bryant:** Even if we were to increase it by 20%, it wouldn't. Even if we were to increase it by 40%, it wouldn't. So I just don't get why this should be a priority.

Lord Ahmad: When you look at what the Commonwealth is, first, what you have stated and I have said in terms of the trade we do across the Commonwealth, the ONS statistics are standing at about 9%. There are opportunities way beyond that. The reason I am more optimistic than you, Mr Bryant, is that, taking a step back before I came into this role and



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before I was in Parliament, I was in business and looking at different deals you would do. You would look at the commonality of the framework of doing a deal and whether there were common factors—in this case within the context of the Commonwealth—such as common ways of looking at justice systems, common ways of looking at doing business and common languages, which I believe are desperately under-leveraged. That in itself provides the optimism I am demonstrating about what the Commonwealth can bring in terms of trade.

However, the facts on the ground at the moment in terms of trade, as you have quoted, are unacceptable, even with the efforts we're making with large Commonwealth countries. You could look at the potential of India, for example. The opportunity is there, again, to extend a stronger bilateral relationship within the context of the Commonwealth and this can be leveraged much further than it has been.

- Q38 **Chris Bryant:** I just wonder whether we wouldn't be better off saying, "Alright, there are four Commonwealth countries that really matter to us—really matter to our economic growth—and where we think we can make significant changes over the next few years and where our values system is more shared than with some of the others." Maybe we would be better off targeting our Commonwealth approach rather than doing this blanket, "Let's all recreate the 1950s."

Lord Ahmad: No, I don't think that is the intention and, as I alluded earlier, there will be occasions—this applies to Britain as much as to other Commonwealth countries—in a collective that happens every two years where there is a common agenda agreed across the Commonwealth nations. However, the Commonwealth family is a network and it provides greater opportunities, on occasion, to do more bilaterally.

I totally agree with your point about focus. There will be times where we will have focus on trade. Equally, on the values system, there are times where, because of our relationship with a particular country—I do not believe that should be ignored—we will be able to extend greater workings on looking at their justice systems, looking at governance systems. That is the strength of the Commonwealth; not to be ignoring all others, but there will be different relationships you will have within the context of the Commonwealth family for different nations. It applies as much to us as it does to any of the other 52 partners. There are times to move together formally, which is every two years when the CHOGM happens, with the general agreements and principles that are made around the Commonwealth agenda across CHOGM. When we look at areas of co-operation, the Commonwealth provides huge potential.

- Q39 **Chris Bryant:** But why would Sri Lanka be more important than Brazil? This is the issue.

Lord Ahmad: I'm not saying it—

- Q40 **Chris Bryant:** That is the point of a priority.



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Lord Ahmad: We do prioritise and that will happen. Within the context of the Commonwealth, in terms of our own bilateral relationships, those will also be reflected. For example, when we look at our security partnerships across the Commonwealth, undoubtedly we have deeper relationships with the likes of Canada, Australia and New Zealand when it comes to security co-operation. Those priorities will be reflected.

Q41 **Chris Bryant:** But difficult with Pakistan?

Lord Ahmad: Difficult with Pakistan, I agree.

Q42 **Chris Bryant:** The treatment of women in India or the treatment of lots of minority ethnicities in Sri Lanka has been absolutely shocking. We had to throw Fiji out of the Commonwealth. It is not actually a shared value system, is it? It might be shared with our values from 100 years ago, but not our shared values from today.

Lord Ahmad: Even when you look at the recent past of the Commonwealth, various states have been asked to leave. It is based on that value system. I believe absolutely that Britain continues to have a key role in issues of soft power. On relationships such as those that you talked about in Pakistan, where the human rights agenda is well known to us, it is because of the nature of our relationships with those countries that I believe, though the context of the Commonwealth, we are able to exert that kind of influence. That should not be ignored. Just because a country may not provide the best trading opportunity, I do not believe that we should recede from influencing it if there is a blatant abuse of rights of particular communities.

Q43 **Chris Bryant:** You will know that at several Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings there have been discussions about resolving finally an issue that has been around since 1949—namely, who is the Head of the Commonwealth. It is not automatically the monarch. That has not been resolved finally. Will there be discussions this time about that?

Lord Ahmad: That is a collective discussion across the 53; it is not a specific point of discussion on the Commonwealth agenda.

Q44 **Chris Bryant:** As I understand it, the British Government position is that we would like it resolved as soon as possible. As I understand it, the royal family would like it resolved, and I would have thought there is an obvious answer. Surely we will try to make it happen this time.

Lord Ahmad: First, I revert to the formal agenda. You have talked about what the British Government and the royal family want; of course, we want any issue of succession resolved. The focus on this particular Heads of Government meeting is also a recognition and celebration of the role that Her Majesty has played in the Commonwealth; undoubtedly, she has been the most incredible ambassador behind this. You have articulated our position. I cannot prejudge any discussions that may take place beyond the formal agenda—for example, around the retreat and so on. At this time, the issue of succession will not be a distraction from the main pillars of what is being discussed on the agreed agenda.



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- Q45 Chris Bryant:** You are right that Her Majesty has been wonderful in relation to the Commonwealth, and in many ways has carried it more than Government. The Prince of Wales has played a significant role, too; in particular, he has taken over some of that. I wonder whether there should be a specific role for the heir to the throne in future.

Lord Ahmad: You are quite right that the Prince of Wales in particular, together with other members, has played an incredible role in the Commonwealth. As you know, our position has always been that we are strong supporters of the Prince of Wales in this context, but I am sure you will agree, Mr Bryant, that it needs to be agreed across the Commonwealth 53.

- Q46 Chris Bryant:** So you think it should be agreed? Good.

Can I ask you about homelessness in Windsor? I was in Windsor a lot last week for various work things. Every 50 yards there are homeless people sleeping on the street. I do not think that any of us subscribes to “let’s sweep everybody off the streets”, but seriously, the view that many people get coming to Windsor is of a country that has a real problem with homelessness. That is not a value that we want to project, is it? What work are you doing with Windsor Council to resolve these issues?

Lord Ahmad: If I may, I will write to the Chairman specifically about some of the actions we are taking. They have been co-ordinated through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. As a general point, one thing that we need to recognise is that homelessness is a big social issue and we need to address its causes. This kind of sweeping statement—“let’s clear the streets”—just for the sake of an event is not something that I subscribe to.

- Q47 Chris Bryant:** A final one from me about Cyprus: obviously, it is in this double space as it is a member of the European Union. Arguably, perhaps we should not have allowed that to happen until such time as that has all been resolved. You still have a divided island. Do you expect that, in the future, Cyprus will give us some kind of privileged relationship with the European Union, as a Commonwealth member?

Lord Ahmad: There will be two countries: Cyprus and, of course, Malta will remain members of the European Union. As to how that relationship is to be determined, it is too early for me to judge.

- Q48 Chris Bryant:** You have not asked them for anything?

Lord Ahmad: Not specifically. In the context of the European Union?

Chris Bryant: Yes.

Lord Ahmad: I am sure those discussions will be held at some future point, depending on the outcome of the trade and Brexit discussions we are having with our European Union partners currently.

- Q49 Chair:** I am intrigued about the conversation about the heir to the throne taking over as head of the Commonwealth. I believe I am right in saying that it was Pandit Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, who in many



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ways “appointed” Her Majesty. When asked who the next head of the Commonwealth would be on the death of His late Majesty George VI, Nehru responded, “The Queen, of course.” Therefore, the decision was made without discussion. Have you, by any chance, had any conversations with either Prime Minister Modi or the high commissioner of the great republic of India about whether the Indian Government has any views?

Lord Ahmad: On this specific issue, no.

- Q50 **Ian Murray:** Can I take you back just two weeks ago to when this Committee discussed the UN with you? You said that you are very keen to try to build an effective Commonwealth caucus in the General Assembly. How do you propose to do that? What would be the way forward?

Lord Ahmad: As you will be aware, Mr Murray, the secretary-general of the Commonwealth attends the UN as well. I want to structure those discussions by using her good offices. We have got a broad agenda, which we have already touched on, for the Commonwealth summit. We are not just looking at this again in two years’ time to see how the review has gone.

I think there are opportunities within the context of the Commonwealth 53 acting on key issues on those very agenda items in the UN. That is something I will be taking forward as the Minister responsible with the secretary-general of the Commonwealth. I think that her role will be pivotal in establishing that kind of approach. To be fair to her, she is very keen to see what more we can do to leverage those relationships.

- Q51 **Ian Murray:** Building a Commonwealth caucus could be hugely important. Are you able to share with us how many Commonwealth countries gave a commitment to vote for the UK’s representative to the ICJ?

Lord Ahmad: It was a secret ballot, as I said at that time.

Chair: That was not quite the question.

- Q52 **Ian Murray:** How many, in a number, gave you a commitment to vote with the UK? Obviously, India didn’t, because their candidate was competing against us. How many of the 50, in this case—obviously, India would not have voted with us—gave a commitment to vote for the UK in that ballot?

Lord Ahmad: As we talked about two weeks ago, the number of votes that were eventually cast was not reflective of the pledges we had. Because it is a secret ballot, I do not want to speculate on the people who pledged to us and then voted for us.

- Q53 **Ian Murray:** I understand it is a secret ballot, but you talked a lot two weeks ago about the number of countries that had given you a commitment to vote with the UK, whether that commitment came through or not. How many of the commitments you received, whether



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they ended up voting for us or not in the private ballot, were from Commonwealth countries?

Lord Ahmad: First, we would be minded to keep those particular discussions, which are private and bilateral—

Q54 **Ian Murray:** I don't want the names of countries. Just give me a figure.

Lord Ahmad: Off the top of my head, I don't know.

Q55 **Ian Murray:** One to 50.

Lord Ahmad: We certainly know it wasn't all 52, as you rightly pointed out, Mr Murray, because India wouldn't have voted for us.

Q56 **Ian Murray:** And the UK presumably voted for ourselves.

Lord Ahmad: That is also a good base assumption.

Chair: Who do you think Pakistan voted for?

Q57 **Ian Murray:** I ask the question because you are very keen to build this Commonwealth caucus at the UN, but it is a very difficult starting point if many of the Commonwealth countries didn't vote for the UK in the first place, in terms of some of the big votes that have happened recently.

Lord Ahmad: Two points on that, if I may. I said, first, that working through the secretary-general would be important. The second point I made was about some of the decisions we take along those four principles and four pillars, and how we move those agendas forward.

For example, in the context of the UN, climate change is a key priority. Sustainability will be discussed. Security is a key priority and will be discussed. That is how you build consensus across the 53.

I accept your point, Mr Murray. As I said two weeks ago, we were disappointed by the figures of those who eventually voted for us—or did not vote for us. But I think we have now got to look forward, and that is how you can build that consensus on the commonality of what has been agreed.

Q58 **Ian Murray:** Could you write to us privately and give us a number?

Lord Ahmad: I am sure we can look into that. Let me take that back. I will come back to Mr Chairman.

Q59 **Chair:** I am taking that as a yes.

Lord Ahmad: No, I said I will come back to you. I cannot go into the details of the deals we did and the specifics—

Q60 **Ian Murray:** I just want a number between zero and 50.

Lord Ahmad: Well, that is something I will take back.

Q61 **Chair:** Of course, you did an after-action review on the basis of the vote in the ICJ, and we spoke about that in the past. Did the Commonwealth come up in that?



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Lord Ahmad: Yes, it did. Very much what I have stated in terms of my future intent to see how we can build relationships is important. If I may, on the Commonwealth and the meeting we will have, we will likely have all 52 other Heads of State here—52 Prime Ministers and Presidents. That has not happened in a very long time at any summit around the world—normally a deputy or foreign Minister is sent as a representative—and that in itself underlines its importance. So, as I said, we are very much hoping that that in itself is a signal of people's perspective across the world towards the United Kingdom. I think the commonality of what we discuss and, through the Heads of Government, we agree, will provide a sound platform to take forward the Commonwealth relationship.

Chair: We recognise and are hugely grateful for the work the Foreign Office has done to bring these wonderful people to the United Kingdom through the auspices of the Commonwealth. We are merely asking whether or not we will see some deliverable results and measurable outcomes in other areas, and perhaps how it could be looked at again. But I won't go over that again.

Q62 **Ian Murray:** Minister, very briefly, you may have to write to the Committee on this question as well, but how much additional resource is the Foreign Office putting into the UK mission at the UN to develop these relationships with the Commonwealth?

Lord Ahmad: We have increased our numbers, but I will write to the Chairman to give you the specifics.

Q63 **Ian Murray:** Is it additional resource or has it come from elsewhere in the budget?

Lord Ahmad: This is additional numbers that we are putting into the UKMis team in New York and indeed in Geneva.

Q64 **Ian Murray:** So it is additional people.

Lord Ahmad: That we are recruiting into those two particular offices, yes. As I said, I will write specifically. The other thing—I think I mentioned this on the previous occasion—is across both Geneva and New York we are looking to increase our numbers. But I will write in specific terms.

Q65 **Ian Murray:** And this is new posts? So you are increasing numbers, not reprovisioning from elsewhere.

Lord Ahmad: As I said, we are creating additional positions within the context of our teams at the UN—

Ian Murray: That doesn't answer the question.

Lord Ahmad: As I said, I don't want to give you something—there may be new posts and there may be allocation of certain posts, so it may be a mixture of both in terms of specifics. But there are new positions being created. In terms of the overall position, because I do not have all the numbers in front of me right now, I think it entirely appropriate that I write to the Committee.



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Q66 **Ian Murray:** Given that the additional resourcing going into the bilaterals with the EU is essentially a reprovisioning, given you are essentially bidding for more money from the Treasury in terms of the issues around the Commonwealth, and given you are looking to put more resource into Geneva and the UN, it seems that the Foreign Office is under-resourced for the issues it has and priorities it wishes to achieve.

Lord Ahmad: Resourcing is a challenge at any time, but we are seeking to reflect our ambition, yes, in the positions. On the point about the EU, it is certainly my understanding that the ambassador network across the European Union is being bolstered by prioritising the seniority of those positions within that context as well, but, if I may, as I said, I will write to you on the specific points of the UN.

Q67 **Chair:** Thank you. Lord Ahmad, we have spoken a little about intra-Commonwealth trade, and you have spoken about different networks forming within the Commonwealth. Have you devoted any resource, or do you know of any resource, that has been devoted to the Department for International Trade to promote intra-Commonwealth trade?

Tim Hitchens: In the Department for International Trade, they have set up a small Commonwealth Summit team that is looking at preparation for the opportunities from the summit. At the moment, intra-Commonwealth trade is worth about \$800 billion, and I think it would be fair to assume that in the course of the next few years, it could reach \$1 trillion, so they are very much focused on ways we can increase that figure from \$800 billion to \$1 trillion.

Q68 **Chair:** Has the Foreign Office made the case that increased visa liberalisation may be one area that could really help here? I know it certainly comes up every time one speaks with an Indian Minister.

Lord Ahmad: I think that is an ongoing discussion that we are having across Government. I don't think there is any specific intention—

Q69 **Chair:** Have you made the case for it?

Lord Ahmad: When we look at trade elsewhere in the world—for example, when we looked at bolstering our trade with China, we certainly looked at business visas and how they operate. It is a topic of discussion, and I think it is a live one.

Q70 **Chair:** It sounds like you haven't made the case, but you are discussing it conceptually.

Lord Ahmad: No, we are discussing it, inasmuch as—as I said, I can only give the example of China. When we looked at certain areas of strengthening trade, we certainly looked at how the business visa in the context of China, for example, could be expedited in a way that reflects that we still have rigorous checks and balances, but the process could perhaps be improved. There are always ways and means of improving processes.

Q71 **Chair:** Such as not counting student visas in the migration numbers?



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Lord Ahmad: You are aware of what our policy is at the moment, and that is not the intention. I am not aware of that.

Chair: I wrote to the Prime Minister specifically about it.

Q72 **Stephen Gethins:** In terms of immigration, do you expect there to be an increase in immigration from Commonwealth countries as you increase trade?

Lord Ahmad: It is very speculative, but as you build relationships with any country, of course there is a greater exchange with those countries, and part of that exchange is people, but it is very difficult, until you know what those flows are, to speculate about what it would be in terms of immigration demand.

If I can give you some examples from the relationships we have, one of the areas I look after, among others, is the Caribbean. When you look at immigration or the visa relationship, I think perception as opposed to fact is somewhat different. Off the top of my head, I think it is something in the region of 80-odd per cent. of those who applied for visas from Jamaica and who went through that due process were subsequently granted them as well. There is a sense of how we can improve things.

On the issue of trade, as relationships develop, of course, the people demand will increase, but it would be going beyond the realms of speculation to say how that will translate itself.

Q73 **Stephen Gethins:** Okay. Let me put it this way: are you planning for an increase in immigration?

Lord Ahmad: As I said, on the people-to-people flow, if we are looking to increase trade, I think we can certainly expect that there will be more requirements in terms of people applying to come here on business.

Q74 **Stephen Gethins:** I will take that as a yes.

Lord Ahmad: Yes, I think it is an inevitable consequence. If we are looking to increase trade, the people-to-people flow follows.

Q75 **Stephen Gethins:** Okay, so we are looking at an increase in immigration as a result of more trade with Commonwealth countries post-Brexit. In Australia and Canada, immigration is dealt with at a sub-state level. Are you talking to sub-state actors about immigration as well?

Lord Ahmad: No, not that I am aware of. It may be the case that Home Office colleagues are, but it is not something that I am—

Stephen Gethins: But it is an interesting take-away that you are planning for an increase in immigration, which of course is a good thing always.

Q76 **Ian Murray:** Minister, if the increase in trade gives you an increase in immigration from Commonwealth countries, which is a priority for increased trade, and the Government's overall policy is to cut net migration to tens of thousands, which countries will be cut in terms of



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immigration in order to have this increase from Commonwealth countries?

Lord Ahmad: What I have said is that there is an inevitable consequence of people flow. Immigration, in its broadest sense, will be people applying to visit the UK, for example, on business, and we will need to look at that. In terms of how this will affect our ambition, it remains the same: to cut immigration, but immigration has very many categories. It would be wrong for me to speculate at this time about what the overall implications would be. I think there is a sense of inevitability that, for example, if we want to increase trade with another country, there will be increased applications for business visas, for example.

Q77 **Ian Murray:** Like India?

Lord Ahmad: Among others.

Q78 **Ian Murray:** Visas are one of their biggest issues. So if the inevitable increase in migration comes from doing more trade with Commonwealth countries like India, where will the reduction come from?

Lord Ahmad: As I said, I am not going to speculate on immigration numbers; I think it would be inappropriate for me to do so.

Q79 **Ian Murray:** You are not speculating; you are discussing policy.

Lord Ahmad: I have given a clear sense that, if we say we want to increase trade within the context of the Commonwealth, people will want to come here and do business with us, which will mean that they will apply for visas. They will go through the due process, and if they meet the requirements of that visa, they will be granted a visa. I am not going to speculate on numbers.

Q80 **Ian Murray:** The Government's migration policy of cutting net migration to the tens of thousands is barking mad in that context, isn't it?

Lord Ahmad: I don't believe that to be the case; that is your opinion, not mine. We need to cut. As I said, there are different categories of immigration, and the Government have a policy on that.

Q81 **Stephen Gethins:** To turn that on its head, have you had any discussions about, or are you planning for, a reduction in emigration? Of course, this is a two-way process, in terms of the Commonwealth.

Chair: Forgive me, but Lord Ahmad is the Commonwealth Minister, not the Immigration Minister.

Stephen Gethins: Emigration and immigration are quite important aspects of our relationship with the Commonwealth.

Lord Ahmad: As I said—I deliberately used the term "the flow of people"—we shouldn't conflate this into a whole debate about immigration. When you have a relationship with countries, people will apply. We have a visa process. If I want to apply for a business visa to a particular country, or a travel visa or a student visa, there are criteria in place. If they meet



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the criteria, they will be granted the visa. I don't think it is overly complex.

Chair: I am going to stop the discussion on migration there, if I may. Ann, you wanted to come in?

Q82 **Ann Clwyd:** I would like to press you a bit about values and shared values. What do the Commonwealth's values amount to if homosexual activity is criminalised in 36 of the 53 Commonwealth countries and the death penalty is imposed in 20 of the 53?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, I agree with you that, when you look across the Commonwealth 53 and you see human rights policies, in certain respects—both in terms of the death penalty and the criminalisation of same-sex relations—those are not values we subscribe to. Indeed, we are strong advocates in that respect—on the death penalty, for example. We repeatedly take this up, including bilaterally. There is a pillar of fairness and equality, and through the media of the people's forum, which will be held during the summit, and indeed, I believe, through the youth forum, LGBT rights and human rights will be reflected in those discussions.

Equally, if I may say, I believe our relationships with different Commonwealth nations allow us to ensure that, when it comes to those difficult, challenging discussions, we raise those issues. If I may illustrate that through an example, I mentioned earlier that I was in the Gambia last week. I had meetings with the President, the vice-president and the Law Minister. The issue of human rights specifically was on my agenda, as they develop, a year on from their new Government being established. I also quite specifically raised LGBT rights as well. I am not saying that they will move instantly on the agenda, but the fact is that they were clear as to what our views are on the issues that we raised.

Again, looking forward, I think the network that is the Commonwealth allows us the opportunity to be able to raise these issues—not just bilaterally, but collectively as well.

Q83 **Ann Clwyd:** I understand that about 80 civil servants are actually working on the summit. How many of those are specifically working on values?

Lord Ahmad: I will turn to Mr Hitchens on that.

Tim Hitchens: In my team, I have about 80 people. Of those, I would say that a team of about eight people are working on values. About half of the 80 are on the logistics side and the preparation for the summit—hotels and what have you. Of the other half, we divide ourselves broadly into the agenda that the Minister set out: security, fairness, trade and climate change. The fairness is the values agenda, so it is about that number of people.

Q84 **Ann Clwyd:** So what specific outcomes does the UK expect, particularly on values, in the next two years after the summit?



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Lord Ahmad: I alluded earlier to the issue of fairness and equality when it comes to education. We will be placing great emphasis on 12 years of quality education. That is one of the key values for both empowerment and education. It is my firm belief that the more girls we educate, the more we will address many of the challenges we face in the broader value system.

Another area I am specifically looking at—we are in discussions with the Commonwealth secretariat and this may well be a British offer in the context of the Commonwealth—is the role of women mediators in conflict resolution. That is also essential. Too often, when you look at issues of conflict around the world that you are seeking to resolve, women are not at the table. They are not involved and directly engaging with it, and I believe strongly that they have a key role to play in mediation. Those are a couple of the areas on which I hope we will be able to make progress, quite specifically, as Chair-in-Office over the next two years.

- Q85 **Ann Clwyd:** Can I quote Mr Hitchens? He said that the UK Foreign Secretary will seek greater activism on foreign policy issues by the Commonwealth ministerial action group. How will that specifically involve the promotion of Commonwealth values?

Tim Hitchens: The Commonwealth ministerial action group is a group of nine Ministers, representative of the different regions of the Commonwealth. The UK does not sit on that group at the moment, but after the summit the UK, being Chair-in-Office, joins that group and the Foreign Secretary will therefore be a member of it. I know that his intention as a member of that group will be to introduce more discussion of issues such as tolerance and democracy in looking at countries that might wish to join the Commonwealth in the future.

- Q86 **Ann Clwyd:** The Prime Minister has also said that the summit will be an occasion to drive forward institutional reforms to make the Commonwealth relevant to the next century. What institutional reforms do you think are necessary to ensure that the values of the Commonwealth mean a lot more and are upheld more consistently?

Tim Hitchens: One area would be that the current secretary-general was elected by the member states on the basis of the reform programme. She has been introducing some significant reforms into the way the secretariat runs its development programme and accounts for its finances. That reform is under way. Another would be to look at the way in which all aspects of the Commonwealth are respected. That is not simply focusing on the work of the secretariat and the 52 member states but, as the Minister has said, looking at the role of associated organisations, non-governmental organisations and civil society, making sure their position is clearly understood as being as important to the Commonwealth as ministerial discussions.

Lord Ahmad: We touched on the issue of the future of the Commonwealth, and perhaps what the Prime Minister was alluding to was that it has to be working for its existing members. What does it bring? We



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have the agenda being discussed at the summit Heads of Government meeting, and our desire and ambition to see specific mandated actions, but those can only be delivered effectively if we have an efficient, working and effective secretariat to ensure it is taken through.

As the Chair-in-Office for two years, there is a role to be played, but it can only be effective if you have a very efficient and effective secretariat. Certainly, the secretary-general has prioritised her work in that respect, and that is what the Prime Minister also wishes to see: a secretariat that is efficient, supportive of, and able to deliver on, the outcomes of the Heads of Government meeting.

Q87 Ann Clwyd: What more will you do to ensure that the UK overseas territories, such as Bermuda, uphold the Commonwealth values?

Lord Ahmad: Again, we have specific and regular discussions with all our overseas territories on those, where we again emphasise the fact that there is a Commonwealth charter, and also the broader obligations of international law and international obligations they need to uphold. The value-based and rules-based system in the Commonwealth is an area that needs to be and can be more greatly emphasised. The overseas territories are self-governing territories, but they are acutely aware of their international obligations.

Q88 Ann Clwyd: Finally from me, would the UK support Zimbabwe's readmission to the Commonwealth, even if it retains the death penalty?

Lord Ahmad: I think the issue of Zimbabwe's membership, first and foremost, will be for Zimbabwe. In terms of the process, it will be for them to make a formal application. As part of that formal application process, that will be discussed across the Commonwealth 53, and it will be a collective decision.

What I will say, as I said earlier, on the issue of the death penalty, is that when you look across the Commonwealth family, there are member states who do not—we had an earlier discussion on values. Values, I think, are shared values, yes, but there are areas where they are not in the place that we, from our perspective, would want to see them in, and the issue of the death penalty is one of them. But I think, through membership of organisations like the Commonwealth, and through our bilateral relationships with the existing members of the Commonwealth, we are able to exert influence and—hopefully—change that we wish to see as well. I think by excluding people totally you don't have that opportunity to exert that kind of influence or, indeed, to have that discussion.

In terms of Zimbabwe's application, that is a matter for them. In terms of the decision, whether they join the Commonwealth or not will be a collective decision of the 53; but we are certainly pleased with the changes we have seen in Zimbabwe on the ground, and we are hopeful that that will also be a catalyst for other changes within the context of Zimbabwean society.

Q89 Chair: Can we move on, perhaps, Minister? I know that you have been



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covering the areas of the Commonwealth, but you also cover some of the UN. Forgive me, but I believe you were told that we were interested in talking about the UN sexual abuse scandal, given your other role—overseeing the United Nations. Perhaps I could start off by asking you what assurances the Foreign Office has received that the United Nations is addressing allegations of sexual abuse and harassment within the organisation, and if it is doing so effectively?

Lord Ahmad: I think there are two parts to your question, Mr Chairman. You will recall that back in September the Prime Minister herself made this a key point of her speech at UNGA. Secretary-General Guterres, on the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse, has also prioritised this as one of his key pillars of reform. During the UNGA week, our ambassador on the ground, who is now the permanent secretary of DFID, arranged a meeting, which was addressed both by the then Development Secretary, Priti Patel, who I know will shortly be joining this particular Committee, and myself, to specifically address issues of sexual exploitation and abuse of different aid workers. There was a very specific, clear, candid message delivered about the UK's position on this, and all UN agencies around that table were very clear as to what our priorities were.

I think that is a momentum we have continued to raise most recently, when, for example, we have had exchanges with the United Nations, including the Secretary-General. The issue of SEA has been a point of discussion, and there is a team both within DFID and the Foreign Office now looking at specific follow-ups on the second part of your question, as to what guarantees or assurances we have with that reform. I certainly believe, and I know it is a view expressed by others across Government—it was the view of the former Development Secretary, and it is the view of the current Development Secretary and the Prime Minister—that it should not be words alone. We need to see actual delivery on this.

Just widening the question, if I may, this also applies to peacekeepers. The other element is that I am the Prime Minister's special representative on preventing sexual violence. It is all very well looking at conflict situations, but those who go in to keep the peace or build the peace—if they themselves are committing these abuses and crimes, then, frankly speaking, there is much more to be done, and we have certainly, again, brought that to the fore.

The final element within this is the conditional element of some of our support for the UN, to ensure that it is also results-driven. We have certainly laid out our stall very clearly from the UK's perspective, and current events over the last few weeks have demonstrated how important that is as a priority.

Q90 **Chair:** One of the subjects that has come up and that we will be looking at in due course is organisations—I include in this, sometimes, the United Nations peacekeeping organisations—who effectively fly the flag for our influence or our representation. Their actions very much carry the responsibility to behave with the values and standards that we would expect of any other UK citizen or agency operating overseas. I was just



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wondering whether you could say what action the FCO will take if it concluded that the UN was not addressing those concerns specifically. You did mention peacekeeping operations. Would that perhaps affect our deployment or our support of overseas operations?

Lord Ahmad: We have been very clear. Partly we have looked at the setting. When we look at financing of the UN, for example, we need to ensure that it is results-driven. We have this issue of saying, “Okay, here’s the money. We support the UN. We are strong supporters of it”—much akin to when we were just talking about the Commonwealth—but these international organisations need to reform to reflect that they are dealing with these issues. If there is blatant abuse, which there is evidence of—be it by peacekeepers or associated agencies of the UN—we will certainly look at how those checks and balances work, but also at how we support their work. That is work in progress, and we will have made it very clear to the UN that this is something that we have prioritised both through the FCO and indeed through DFID.

Q91 **Chair:** As you know, these allegations and the failure to address them have given rise to the feeling that there is a lack of accountability here. We have heard about certain aspects of this within the FCO staff—certainly we heard that from Simon McDonald, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State, when we spoke to him. Can you assure us that the Foreign Office is redoubling its efforts on this? This is a matter of huge concern to the Committee and to Parliament as a whole.

Lord Ahmad: Yes. Absolutely. After the events of recent weeks, everyone needs to look at all organisations, all workings and particularly people who are deployed into highly sensitive situations to ensure that the highest standards are being met.

Q92 **Chair:** You understand that the delivery of aid through agencies and through non-UK-specific organisations—Oxfam is obviously one, but so is the World Health Organisation, and there are very many others—is an intrinsic part of our foreign policy. How much of a contribution would you say that such organisations make to our overall foreign strategy?

Lord Ahmad: I think they are key accredited delivery partners. They are a crucial part of how we look at particularly our support through the development programme, but that is only acceptable if they are meeting the criteria and the standards—adhering to the highest standards when they are delivering that particular assistance.

As to what has happened now, I know that, with the Secretary of State for International Development, whom I met on this very issue yesterday, we feel very keen to ensure that whatever is happening in the context of DFID is not separate from what is happening at the Foreign Office. This is very much an integrated approach to ensure that the accountability issue is something that permeates all workings through all organisations. While the NGO relationship and our NGO partners are extremely important, development can only be done effectively if they are meeting the highest standards. I think the Secretary of State for International Development



has been very clear about what the outcome will be for those who don't meet the standards, which will be a withdrawal of funding.

- Q93 **Chair:** You have been very clear that funding of UN agencies and UN activity overseas is conditional and results-driven. In the circumstances we have been speaking about, you have been very clear that that funding is conditional on responding to allegations of sexual abuse, both in the UN main offices and in missions overseas. Will you please give any specific examples that point to a change in culture or to the UN addressing the issues?

Lord Ahmad: One of the steps that the UN has taken more recently was the compact on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse, which was signed on the initiative of the Secretary-General inviting countries to come forward and sign it. Of course, we have. That was a particular initiative that is actually a call for action on ensuring that these things are carried through.

At a very senior level in the United Nations, through the Secretary-General's office, there is a real desire to address these issues. However, the real challenge remains, Mr Chairman, which is seeing practical delivery. So, the initiatives are being taken, but I feel that part of our role, as an important part of the United Nations family, is to ensure that we get action and delivery on that.

One of the specific things we are doing within both the Foreign Office and DFID is to ensure that those criteria and those discussions that we have had through the United Nations General Assembly last year don't just get revisited in September this year. So there are specific teams working on what has been achieved and what is being achieved through the mandates of peacekeeping troops, but also in terms of how other NGOs linked through the development programmes are working. However, there is still a lot of work to be done.

- Q94 **Chair:** You can assure me that we are not simply ignoring things on the grounds of "Oh, that's culturally normal here"—that sort of attitude—particularly when women's rights are absolutely fundamental, as we all know, to building a stable state in any country?

Lord Ahmad: My response to anyone who still starts articulating that line, and it is something that I have heard, is that they need to take a long, hard look at themselves and say, "What are they actually saying? That this is acceptable?" And if the answer is still yes, they need to take a long, hard look to see whether they are doing the right job.

For me, it is very clear that this kind of abuse is unacceptable and we need to eradicate it. And if it's happening at the UN—as I said, what struck me, and I know that when I was sitting in New York with the previous International Development Secretary it struck them as well, is that if the people going in to help people, in terms of development or to keep peace, are committing these abuses, what hope are you bringing to those poor victims, who not only have to go through that once but twice or thrice? It is unacceptable and we need to stamp it out.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q95 **Chair:** Lord Ahmad, thank you very much for what is—I think—your third appearance before this Committee in just over a month. Maybe same time next week?

Lord Ahmad: There will be something missing in my life if I'm not back here. However, I am glad, and I hope I've been as open as I can be. I very much look forward to working towards the Commonwealth summit, and I hope that all of you will join us in hoping that it will be a success for all of us.

Q96 **Chair:** There is one last thought on the Commonwealth summit: how much will you include Parliament?

Lord Ahmad: Mr Rosindell has disappeared now, but I have been engaging directly with the various chairs of the APPGs for all the Commonwealth countries, and it is my intention that, apart from the CPA event that Mr Murray referred to, there will be another letter—you will probably get bored of my letters, I think. The next letter will outline the arrangements for parliamentary engagement directly, and I hope that Mr Hitchens will be with me to meet all the APPGs collectively in advance of the final event.

Chair: Fantastic. Lord Ahmad, thank you very much indeed.