



Select Committee on International Relations

Corrected oral evidence: UK foreign policy in changed world conditions

Wednesday 20 June 2018

10.40 am

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Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (Chairman); Baroness Anelay of St Johns; Baroness Coussins; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Lord Jopling; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

Evidence Session No. 14

Heard in Public

Questions 136 - 146

Witness

[I](#): Sir Ciarán Devane, Chief Executive, British Council.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witness

Sir Ciarán Devane.

Q136 **The Chairman:** Sir Ciarán, good morning and welcome. Thank you for coming before this Committee this morning. We very much appreciate your presence here. As a formality, I have to state that this meeting is on the public record. It is all recorded and there is a manuscript afterwards, which you are free to change and adjust as you wish. I also have to remind my colleagues that we all have to declare relevant interests.

That said, could we begin? I think you are aware of the nature and scope of our inquiry, which is on facing hugely changed world conditions in all their aspects. The impact of this on the nature, formation and priorities of our foreign policy and diplomacy is obviously considerable. We seek to advise Parliament—to report to Parliament and the Government—of our views on how best to adjust to these completely new conditions.

At the heart of this is the technology and information revolution that has transformed the world, which may have transformed the kind of instruments that we use to promote our interests, safeguard our concerns around the world and make our contribution to peace and stability.

That is the background. My first question to you is this. What is your opinion of the present equipment of the Government, or how that might be improved, to develop and utilise the United Kingdom's power and influence, particularly its soft power in these totally new world conditions?

Sir Ciarán Devane: Thank you, Lord Chairman. The starting point for me is that we have a lot of assets in that soft power, cultural relations and public diplomacy space in which we should have confidence. The results of a survey of almost 20,000 young people that we conducted across the G20 were clear. They admire our education system, our rule of law, our public services and our cultural institutions. The starting point is that we as a nation and a Government have an excellent bank of assets, which we can deploy intelligently.

The second point for me is that the Government has a role in convening, not necessarily to be instrumental but in a way that articulates the need to activate these assets. A major part of the role of government is to ensure that when any foreign policy issue is looked at, soft power and cultural relations are among the sets of tools that are looked at.

There is a huge role for government in doing that rather than looking at a topic and asking whether it is a hard-power or development issue. There is a phrase which the National Security Adviser is using a lot at the moment when he talks about having a "fusion doctrine". There is a major role for government in making itself consciously competent in this area, while understanding that one should always consider using the soft-power tools that are available.

The good news from my conversations, whether with the Foreign Office or the National Security Secretariat, or with defence and education, is that people are becoming increasingly aware of that. The level of co-

ordination that we see internationally, at mission level in particular, is increasing. The risk would be to instrumentalise it and be more dirigiste, or very tactical, about it. The Government themselves are just beginning to think that through with the development of a soft-power strategy which the Foreign Office is about to write. I am optimistic about that.

Lastly, we must not look at this issue as being just state to state or Government to Government. A huge amount of the engagement of the United Kingdom globally in a soft-power sense is at city level. The relationship between London and Moscow is not the same as that between Her Majesty's Government and the Government of the Russian Federation. The relationship between the Baltic Centre in Gateshead and South Korea would never really make the radar at governmental level.

It is about understanding that there is that network and that the complexity and depth of the UK's engagement is what needs to be activated, not at a tactical level on a particular issue, "Can you help with this?", or for a particular institution, "Can we maximise that?" Creating the environment is the biggest contribution that the Government can make. As the soft-power strategy emerges, I hope they will write that in.

The Chairman: How do you feel about the work of the British Council in relation to other bodies promoting Britain's soft-power influence, attractiveness and so on across Whitehall and the government machine? If you do not want to be too linked in, do you feel that there is sufficient co-ordination and understanding to make a really effective presentation, particularly in new world conditions?

Sir Ciarán Devane: I think we are additive where we focus on relationships. Our very first annual report, written in 1940, talked about using the cultural resources of the UK to foster the interchange of knowledge, ideas and discoveries. We do that to create a basis of friendly knowledge and understanding of the UK, so that the foreign policy objectives of the UK will receive sympathetic appreciation.

This idea of interchange is about people who know each other and institutions that have deep connections. These days, the way of doing that connectedness has been challenged hugely by technology, as you implied. The challenge for us is to adapt to that world. The tools that we traditionally used were the school in Madrid for the children of the opponents of Franco, or the libraries in Sofia where dissidents would go to connect with the rest of the world.

What is the modern version of that, and how does it generate a relationship with the UK as opposed to a transaction with it? Just because someone went to the British Council's Facebook page and had a nice time, it does not establish a relationship, so what is that depth?

At the British Council, part of my role is to help government in the widest sense understand that the principles that make good soft power work—around longevity, mutuality, persistence and being relevant to your partner's agenda as well as your own—are understood. At one level we

do not get ignored; at another, we do not get instrumentalised. It is that Goldilocks paradox of trying to be in the middle.

Baroness Coussins: First, I declare my interest as vice-chair of the All-Party Group on the British Council. The British Council also supports the all-party modern languages group, which I chair.

In the bank of soft-power assets, as you described it, one is of course the English language. The British Council has long done very good work in providing English language education across the globe. But you also, I believe, recognise the importance of the UK learning foreign languages as part of the exercise of soft power. A number of reports from Select Committees in the House of Lords over the past few years, notably the one on the Middle East and the one on EU-Russia relations, have flagged up this issue and the fact that a national deficit in modern language skills has hampered progress in relationships around the world.

Can you comment on the current competence, or lack of it, within government and across departments such as the Foreign Office and DfID, which the British Council deals with? In the British Council itself, what is the state of our and your language skills and what needs to be done to improve them?

Sir Ciarán Devane: I know that the Foreign Office, for example, has put quite a bit of energy behind this recently. It is actively promoting language skills and investing more in them. We are looking at doing the same. To be honest, we have been fortunate in the language capability of the people we have. I would worry that if we did not invest in that more in future, we would see a decline. We have wonderful Arabists who speak multiple dialects of Arabic, but they are very hard to grow and nurture, and then replace when ultimately they retire. We are trying to identify the key posts globally so that you would not be the director of the British Council in China if you did not speak Mandarin. If you have that ambition, how can we help you to learn Mandarin now so that when you are a candidate in 10 years' time you will be able to do it?

There is more to do and it is crucial. We are very fortunate that English is a lingua franca. We are very unfortunate in the sense of wanting that deeper in-country relationship. We see that in Georgia, for example, where we have people who are proficient in Georgian. It makes a huge difference to our ability to impact.

Language capability is not strong enough from a British Council point of view, but my observation is that it is improving across government.

The Chairman: Do you want to pursue that, Baroness Coussins?

Baroness Coussins: No.

Q137 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** I would like to ask you two things. The first is about scholarships: Commonwealth, Chevening, Marshall and so on. I know that you do not fund them, but I think you facilitate them and are involved in them in many different ways. Is what we are doing in the

form of these scholarship schemes sufficient, or would it help your work if there were more of them and the British Government funded bigger scholarship schemes? Could you manage the role that you have to play in selection if the numbers were increased?

Secondly, and this is quite different, can you comment a little on access to higher education in the UK? Higher education students seem in many cases to be somewhat deterred by the immigration policy and the issue of treating such students as economic migrants, which seems absurd to me. There has been long-running disagreement on that between Members of this House and the Government.

Can you give us your own picture of whether we are making the most of our world-beating higher education establishments, which are probably second only to those in the United States, and whether our immigration and migration policy is impeding, in different and perhaps sometimes unintentional ways, making the most of our soft power in this sector?

Sir Ciarán Devane: We have a relatively small role in administering scholarships now. We no longer do Chevening, for example, but the scholarships are hugely impactful. The number of people I meet around the world where I can get in the door because they studied in the UK in the past is tremendous. They are one of the most powerful things, but they are expensive and there is a big debate about them.

I was talking to the lady who runs Fulbright scholarships about whether it should be a two-year scholarship for a master's. What would happen if you gave a very short scholarship? There would be 10 times the number of people. What no one challenges is that the experience of having an education in a different country opens your eyes, and not only to the world and the country you study in; it gives you a perspective on your own country as well.

There are also all the financial and career benefits that come through. Scholarships are incredibly powerful and the brand of Chevening or Commonwealth scholarships is fantastic. If the money were available, increasing them would be a very good thing. That is not from a self-interested point of view, because we are largely not involved.

I would look at the other issue of short interventions. For example, we help young people to study and apprentice in China for three months, and it is life-changing. Their understanding and insight into China may not be as good as if they had spent a year or two studying there, but they get 70% of the benefit, at least. So I would look at increasing the range of scholarships and their flexibility, partly to get reach and partly to access different people. They might be in their 30s and could not take a year away, which may be for family or career reasons, but you could get them for three months. That is where I would look.

On visas and maximising the capability, I and we have a long-held position that student numbers should not be in the net migration numbers. They are a deterrence. It is very bad for the UK brand in places

such as India, which really matter. We administer IELTS, the international English language testing system, but we administer far more exams for Indian students who want to study in Canada than want to study in the UK. The number of visas that Canada grants to Indian students is far higher than the number of UK grants.

The good news is that, having collapsed, the number of Indian students has gone up—I think by 30% in the last year¹—because we have done some very good marketing, jointly with the GREAT campaign. But it is a huge deterrence, and I never have a conversation where visas do not come up. A Japanese delegation of business people came in recently and we were talking about having a cultural year with Japan. They said, “Before we talk about that, can we talk to you about visas?” It is everywhere, not only for students but for professionals.

The other aspect is post-study work visas. Students who come to the UK and, let us say, go back to India may be competing with somebody who went to Canada or Australia and then goes home but with a year or two’s experience when they arrive. The Indian student who has studied in the UK has a competitive disadvantage in getting the job. They also use the two years to save some money to pay back the loan, often to their family who paid for them to study in the first place. We are disincentivising people from coming to the UK because of that.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: The Indian figures that you mentioned have of course gone back up from a very low base. They had basically collapsed.

Sir Ciarán Devane: They did. I think they went down by 43% in three years², so that 30% increase is from the lower base.

The Chairman: While we are on scholarships, it was suggested to me by a Marshall scholar in Washington, where some of the Committee was last week—in fact, this leading scholar is now one of the Supreme Court judges—that in view of the rather flaky relationship between Britain and America at the moment, this is a time to put much more effort into the Marshall scholarship programme. His particular urging was that it should be brought even closer to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. What do you think of that comment?

Sir Ciarán Devane: If the principle is that more scholarships are good, whether those are Marshall, Commonwealth or whatever, I am for it. It is very hard not to be supportive.

On how it is administered, Chevening is outsourced and it can be done very well. The intriguing thing for me about scholarships is the people who did not get them, or nearly did, as well as the people who do. How do we stay in touch with a candidate who was nearly successful and

¹ Student visas issued

² Indian student enrolments in the period between 2011/12 and 2015/16

nearly as good, and in touch with the alumni? That is where the sustained reputation, value and engagement are.

Can I give you a slightly tangential example? We run an event, in the House of Lords and House of Commons, called Future Leaders Connect. Last year, we brought in 50 young people from around the world who had been through a kind of selection. Think of it for a moment as a two-week scholarship. Some 11,000 people applied for that. We will have selected 50 wonderful people who will have a great connection with the UK in future, but many of those 11,000 do, too. We are trying to develop a digital version of the course and the experience that they would have had if they were one of the 50 to make that available online to the 11,000. We are just recruiting for it this year and 16,000 have applied.

If it is about connectedness, there is a challenge for us to say that it is not just about the few, because they will be brilliant and president of somewhere, but the many as well. Many of them will be amazing. How do we as the UK use the advantages of digital to stay in touch with those unsuccessful applicants and ensure that we actively manage the relationship with the alumni in a way that 20 or even 10 years ago was practically impossible?

Q138 Lord Grocott: We have had various bits of information about the Commonwealth from a number of our witnesses and about the way that relationships might develop in future. Can you give a brief picture about the proportion of your work and activities that are with Commonwealth countries, which constitute a pretty big chunk of the planet, especially India? Can you give us a picture of that and perhaps speculate on how you see it developing?

Sir Ciarán Devane: I will mention the Commonwealth and its institutions first, if I may. I absolutely subscribe to the vision of the Commonwealth as a network. The connection that we have and the work that we do jointly with the Association of Commonwealth Universities is distinctive and additive to the binary relationships that we have with, let us say, universities in Australia. It gives us something extra. It allows us to leverage the diversity of the Commonwealth and have conversations that we could not have just bilaterally. That, for example, is good partnership.

Equally, programmes such as Commonwealth Class, which started with the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and is now coming to an end, has allowed us to connect with schools across the Commonwealth as a community. It is not just a UK connection with a school in Australia or India but the connections that we are establishing between a school in the UK and one in India, and a school in India with one in Australia. It is about finding that network, so that works very well.

The bilateral relationship with Commonwealth countries is in two halves, to be honest. This goes back to our interesting funding arrangements, where the grant in aid for work in the Commonwealth that we get from the taxpayer is increasingly moving towards work in developing

countries. In just over 12 months' time, the expectation we have been given is that 100% of our grant will be spent in developing countries. We will be able to find a way to have our programmes and relationships, such as our ability to do the fantastic year of culture that we have just done with India. In Australia we have £100,000 to spend, so we have very little capacity. It is a tale of two halves in that sense.

Our ability to function in Commonwealth countries is entirely dependent on whether they are on the OECD³ list of ODA-able⁴ countries. I do not believe that is necessarily the strategic direction; it impacts on other countries as well, of course. We have very strong relationships and, in some places, consistent programmes. One may believe that soft power is about consistency and commitment, over time and in difficult times. In Canada, however, where we did a very good job for its 150 years and the Montréal celebrations recently, we will go quiet there now for a while. That ability to sustain the relationships at institutional and individual levels, and maybe at national level, is not necessarily where it should be.

Lord Grocott: Am I right that as a proportion of the total work of the British Council, the Commonwealth accounts for more than its proportion of the world's population would suggest? Is there not quite a hangover, particularly in African countries where it is assumed that we will be more active than in other, French-speaking parts of Africa?

Sir Ciarán Devane: Yes, absolutely, so there are the Nigerias, Ugandas, Kenyas and South Africas. Our biggest operation is in India. Pakistan and Bangladesh also have huge operations. But we are very small in other places.

The Chairman: Just to be crystal clear, grant in aid is obviously a minor part of your overall funding, but you do not get grant in aid for operations in what are described as developed or middle-income countries.

Sir Ciarán Devane: Yes, the non-ODA countries. We have just been given a grant that will see us through to the end of this spending review, but the expectation was that until we had this negotiation, with the help of the Treasury and the Foreign Office, that grant in aid for non-ODA countries would go to zero. This means that the only cash available will be the surplus that we would make from our English-language business or the exams business, which has other demands on it.

Q139 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** I similarly declare that I am an office holder in the all-party group.

I want to return to something that you mentioned earlier about perceptions and how others see us. I think you were referring to your 2014 report, *As Others See Us*. Was that correct?

Sir Ciarán Devane: That is correct.

³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

⁴ Official Development Assistance

Lord Purvis of Tweed: I believe there has been an update post the Brexit referendum, but what tools do we have to map perceptions properly? In many respects, 2014 is potentially a very long time ago in a fast-changing world. In other respects, it may be slower to change the perceptions of nations. As you said, it is not just about government policy.

First, what tools are available for us to map global perceptions properly? As you mentioned, that report was about the G20, but what about the G77 or going much broader?

Secondly, is there a centralised tool so that not just the British Council but DfID, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence—all our outward-looking departments—could have a common understanding, in government and those British entities as a whole, of the perceptions of the United Kingdom in other parts of the world? Can you break it down, as that report did, into different demographics and regions?

Sir Ciarán Devane: For clarity, we did that survey twice, just before the referendum and again after it, so it is dynamic but relatively current. We are polishing a piece of work at the moment that looks at levels of trust in the United Kingdom and the drivers of that trust. That is forthcoming. I think you are hinting at something important, which is that a lot of the evidence we have, and which we can glean from other people's surveys of what people think of their countries, is fragmented. There is no holistic, standard, repeatable methodology that we are all applying and reading so as to ask, "What does this mean for us?"

As it happens, there is a proposal in with the council at the moment to develop that methodology and do it electronically, which is also being talked about with some of our colleagues across some European institutions—that is, our equivalents rather than European Union institutions. That is to see what people are talking or thinking about, and to be able to do that using social media.

The evidence, where it exists, is relatively consistent in what it says about what people admire about the UK. The trust data seems to say that things such as the rule of law, Britain's position on aid, our cultural institutions, the quality of public services and higher education are all attributes that get people to say, "I like and trust the UK because I see these things in it". We will have some more data on that. What does not exist is an agreed methodology on how to measure this work. There is a bit of it when we talk to some colleagues.

You have to believe in cultural relations and soft power at some point, but they are hard to prove. How do I show that our engagement in Russia has made a difference over the decades? I could give evidence and show correlations or some causation, but at the end of the day you have to believe that people-to-people relationships with their networking and engagement are a good thing. How far we can go in improving that is challenging.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: Would a tool such as that—a UK barometer; I am not sure whether it would be the equivalent of the Eurobarometer—be about how others see us? Would a centralised tool with agreed methodology be useful, so that any embassy official, any desk officer in Whitehall, any DfID member of staff or any defence attaché could utilise it on a regular basis?

Sir Ciarán Devane: I think so, as long as, like any tool, it is used intelligently. If it is used to create a conversation, good. If it is treated as being the answer, that would be a problem.

The Chairman: Let us move on to the digital world, which enters every part of our existence.

Q140 **Lord Jopling:** I am sure you will be aware that the inquiry which this Committee has embarked on has at its centre the impact of new technologies, digital arrangements and so on. Perhaps you might tell us how all this has affected the way in which the British Council operates. To what extent have you changed your way of working to meet these new trends? In particular, to what extent do you believe that the UK and your own organisation are adapting your international activities in response to all these changes?

What plans do you have to develop that? In particular, in an age when hybrid warfare is becoming much more prevalent, to what extent are you involved in helping to counter misinformation, which is one of the new techniques of hybrid warfare that confront us at the moment?

Sir Ciarán Devane: This may be a slightly long answer, if you will forgive me. The first and simplest impact of technology is that it allows us to amplify what we do. It is the equivalent of having the 50 people who came here, but now, through a massive open online course, we can access the 11,000.

We were talking recently about a programme with Aardman, the company behind 'Shaun the Sheep'. We did a digital-only collaboration with that company in India as part of the UK-India year of culture. There were 18 million people in India essentially accessing a cultural event online, and we could not have done that previously. That is so much more effective than having an event in one building in one city in India. It supports our strategy for engaging at state level in India in a way that we could not have done in a previous world. That is changing, so amplification is one thing.

The second thing that technology is doing for us is in using digital in education. Of course, we are quite good at digital arts in the UK. I have brought one example with me in anticipation. There is a partnership that we, the BBC and ARM, the microchip manufacturer, are involved with called micro:bit. It is a tiny computer. When we talk to education ministries around the world, they say, "Digital literacy is important for our children and we don't want them left behind". To take the western Balkans as an example, we will be bringing this tiny computer to every primary school child in all six countries there, jointly with their ministries

of education. Technology is allowing us to have conversations that are relevant to the societies we are working with. That is an unforeseen benefit of the digital revolution.

Touching on what you said about counternarratives, as an institution we do not directly get into that. We do not say "That's somebody else's job", whether it is in the Home Office or whatever, but we have programmes with a number of Governments to the east of us around media literacy. For example, how can you distinguish between news and fake news? We are not taking a position against any particular narrative. We work by saying, "How do we help young people in these countries become media literate and understand what they are being told?". Can they apply critical thinking to what they are told and distinguish between BBC World Service and whatever else?

Another thing we do involves not direct counternarratives but alternative narratives, if I can distinguish between the two. We are working with a number of ministries on programmes where we are helping young people with things that they want to do, such as improving their communities. Having digital engagement with large numbers of young people in particular countries about helping their communities is not necessarily a counternarrative but an alternative to the one that goes, "Do you want to pick up a Kalashnikov and go to Syria?".

It is the approach of an active, positive, alternative pathway, which we know is effective. Because we talk to some of those involved in the other House about the relevant effectiveness of what we are doing, we know that it is helpful in that context. The bit we do not do is to get into counterterrorism, counterextremism and so on. That is not our role *per se* in the direct sense.

Lord Jopling: As I understood it, you said that you were not involved in countering fake news, but you operate in a great many countries where the population is subjected to fake news from other, much more powerful countries. I am very surprised that you do not find this to be part of your remit and something that you ought to get involved with.

Sir Ciarán Devane: I am picking my words carefully. Media literacy and digital literacy are absolutely about creating environments where people can talk about human rights or whatever. Direct confrontation with other narratives is not something that we have engaged with.

Q141 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** I have one comment. I do not think I agree with my esteemed colleague here. You are wise not to focus on counternarrative in that you are trying to produce an objective, whether that is cultural, news-related or whatever. In the long run, that is more effective than if you were perceived to be skewing towards becoming merely an arm of the Government in their counterterrorism strategy. I understand what Lord Jopling is saying, but in the long run your decision is probably better.

My question is a technical one. You said earlier that your budget is

focused increasingly on the requirement of in-country spend. Did I understand you right?

Sir Ciarán Devane: Yes, it is in-country ODA spend—official development assistance spend.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Given that the world in which we live, particularly its digital and technological communications, allows massive opportunities for online education and experiences, as you pointed out, presumably a lot of that spend would be at the production end even though the effect is in-country. Does this reshaping of the budget curtail your ability to expand that very effective and important element, the massive online education courses and so on?

Sir Ciarán Devane: Yes, if we cannot demonstrate a benefit in an ODA country against the criteria for ODA. If we take a UK designer to Karachi and he or she showcases their work, even though Pakistan is an ODA country that would not qualify because it does not have a development outcome.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: To get to the nub of this, the criteria are in the effect rather than the input. Is it judged on the output as regards any in-country effect?

Sir Ciarán Devane: Yes, correct.

Q142 **The Chairman:** Just two further questions on this. Can you explain again, for those of us who are more slow-minded, what that flashing device is that you just showed?

Sir Ciarán Devane: It is a little computer that primary schoolchildren learn how to code on. As I said, it was developed in partnership with the BBC, the chip manufacturer ARM, us and a number of other partners. We are mass-producing it and making it available—this is just one example—to every primary schoolchild in the western Balkans, who will get to play with one of these.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: It is a British-manufactured chip or a Chinese one?

Baroness Helic: Do they need to put it into something or just use as it is?

Sir Ciarán Devane: You use it as it is. It has little buttons that you can use if you are a primary schoolchild. I would be defeated entirely, despite my engineering qualifications.

Baroness Helic: I thought you might want to demonstrate it.

The Chairman: That is fascinating technology. I have a final question on this area. To what extent has this whole, vast information revolution resulted in more people passing through your offices round the world, or a larger subscription to British language classes? How have the numbers actually turned out?

Sir Ciarán Devane: It is increasing our reach exponentially. Internet penetration has grown by 83% over the last seven years but our internet penetration has grown by over 200%. We at the British Council have the world's largest open online courses. We did one on Shakespeare recently and 29,000 people in Egypt alone signed up to that Shakespeare course. The numbers are staggering; in terms of reach, they are almost broadcast numbers.

The challenge for us is to make sure that reach becomes relationship. How do we truly connect these people with the UK and make sure they do not just say, "That was a great Shakespeare course and now I'm on to something else"? What is their journey with the UK so that it is the beginning of the funnel, not the end? That is the challenge that we have to work through. Everything we see so far shows that where we can apply technology intelligently, whether in education or the cultural sector, we can make that shift.

If I may give one example, there is a film festival that we run jointly with the BFI. Every year, we put out five films on LGBT issues. Effectively, we run an online festival around the world. People came in to our offices or took over cinemas to watch it in, I think, 202 countries or states last year. That is more than there are members of the United Nations. We are able to reach countries that we are not in through some of these programmes, and because of the topic and the discussions organised around it I think it is about relationships; it is not just about watching a movie on your iPad. How we have that conversion from reach into relationship is a key challenge for us as an institution.

The Chairman: That is very interesting and impressive. Power is shifting in the world and the giants are awakening, as Napoleon said they would. Baroness Anelay wants to ask questions in this area.

Q143 **Baroness Anelay of St Johns:** I was struck that in your opening remarks you described how the UK Government can provide the environment in which you can then best use your assets. I would like to focus on your view of how you can best use those assets in a world where, as the Chair says, the tectonic plates are changing. We have emerging powers, as China seems to be; it is beyond the chrysalis and going further.

How would you define, from your point of view, the emerging powers on which you wish to concentrate, and how much are the UK Government assisting you? I am reflecting on what Lord Reid just asked about the funding of the British Council and how we are moving UK funding towards zero in the non-ODA-able countries.

There is also the requirement to provide the impact of development as a result. Given that it is difficult for some of us to see the emerging countries falling into the area where the UK Government will provide direct assistance, how does that affect the way in which you are able to operate and work effectively in those emerging states?

Sir Ciarán Devane: Let me tell you what our priority countries are first. That might help to frame it. In the short term, our first priority is young people in the Middle East and north Africa. You will understand all the reasons for that. The second priority is countries where the demographics could damage the education system. If the education system of a large country where the population is growing exponentially falls over, that is bad for the country and bad for the rest of us, too. The BRICs⁵ and the MINTs⁶ are clearly priorities, including Russia and its neighbourhood, and then the major trading partners and our European friends. That is quite a long list, but how we treat each of them on that list is different.

In our relationships with India and China, which qualify for ODA, we are okay as long as they do that. China will flip, and the day it flips we have a big decision to make. In countries that are future major trading partners—Chile, for example, is moving over the cusp from ODA to non-ODA—that forces a decision for us. We are talking to our Australian colleagues at the moment about doing a large programme with them. We will try to find partners to fund some of it and be able to put a little in. But it will not be quite what we want, so we are feeling restricted.

The other group of countries where there will be an impact are ones that are strategically significant. Japan, as an established market, Saudi Arabia, as an emerging power, and Russia, of course, are all the wrong side of that line. Without overplaying or overpleading—whatever the right word is—there is a disconnect at the moment between our ability to deploy resources and the strategic importance of a country to the United Kingdom. That will be a major conversation in the next spending review.

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: In the meantime, how are you able to deal with, for example, the potential development of work in Chile? The GRULAC,⁷ as a group of countries, has tended to have what are almost the forgotten heroes of the world.

Sir Ciarán Devane: We think we have strong programmes in places such as Colombia, Argentina, Brazil and Chile. The onus is on us to be as efficient and frugal as possible, in our overheads and everything, so that we are releasing resources. When we finalise our annual accounts shortly, I hope we will have a good tale to tell and be able to release more cash to mitigate some of this.

For us to be effective, the key is to connect UK partners who are interested in a particular country, such as Chile, and to be on the agenda, which is important for the Government there. Chile has a stated ambition to be the most English language-proficient state in Latin America. It is not the only country to tell me that, but it certainly has that ambition. We also need to make sure that we are focused on their agenda and then leverage those partners. Then we can deliver the most value to them and strengthen the relationship as much as possible, in the most economical

⁵ Brazil, Russia, India and China

⁶ Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey

⁷ The Latin American and Caribbean Group, a United Nations Regional Group

way. That is the trick we have to pull out. In some other countries where we have massive interests as a nation, it is more difficult.

Q144 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Can you comment on, because you must have observed this, the rapid expansion of China's Confucius institutes? One reads reports in the press about China's attempts to ensure that it controls its overseas students in some way or another when they study in foreign universities. Can you give us a feel for how China's soft power is developing and how benign it is?

The Chairman: If I may add a rider to that excellent question, do we regard these Confucius and Mencius institutes as competitors or something in parallel to what we have?

Sir Ciarán Devane: China is investing hugely—to the order of billions—in its overseas soft power. They are learning quickly. They are at a stage that many cultural institutes were at a few decades ago of being very much about explaining, "Let me tell you about us". They are very much about what I call projection—"Let's make sure we're heard"—but are learning quickly to recognise the assets that China has. The Chinese new year, for example, is a very big asset for marking China around the world.

I do not see them as competitors. I see them as institutions to engage with. That engagement in itself is important. The step which I am sure it will make at some time in the very near future is to move from that kind of projection-type work into relationship work. I am sure that will happen. You can see it in the scholarships which they are providing to African students, for example. If I can find the number somewhere—it will be on the other page—it is in the order of 30,000. It is called the African talents programme. There were 30,000 African professionals in China between 2013 and 2015. It is the scale of the investment. They have a very capable and intelligent foreign ministry and public servants and they will do it very well.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: How we do know which is most effective? You seem to have the entire thrust on relationship building. It is a long-standing relationship, since before the Second World War. It seems to be our settled approach. How do we know that that is more effective than building infrastructure, schools, rail networks and massive friendship halls in every capital? How do we know that our approach is more effective?

Sir Ciarán Devane: We can measure the level of trust in the UK and the drivers of that trust. We can measure the level of admiration for other countries. In the research on how others see us, we were asking what people think of the other G20 countries as well. We can see the differences in that. When the trust data is finalised, one of the things it will say is that aid really does matter. It is part. I would not say there is only one approach, but in the spectrum of tools that the United Kingdom has, one of the things we have which is additional and distinctive is how good we are at this relationship thing, which is why we are more effective than other countries.

We know that where institutions like us, the Goethe-Institut and the Alliance Française exist, inward investment and trade is higher. We have the correlation from the work that the University of Edinburgh did⁸, so we know it works. I am not saying it is a replacement for anything else. Of course we need DIT and DfID for soft power, but one of the things we have which has been shown to be very effective is that spectrum which includes the BBC World Service, us, the great institutions which we all know and also the hundreds of others.

We connected more than 1,100 UK organisations with the Americas last year, well over 1,000 organisations that would not otherwise have a connection. Those connections will last, long before any intervention in future from any British Council employee. That is where the cumulative benefit comes from. That extra trade is not because anybody in the British Council is doing a deal; it is because the environment was created and we know that works.

The Chairman: Finally, we turn to that other aspiring, troublesome and not-so-great power, Russia.

Q145 **Baroness Helic:** I shall use this opportunity to ask a small question on another issue. On Russia, we know that the British Council had a few hiccoughs over the past year, or a bit longer. How important is soft power in this relationship? Does it reveal a lack of ability to impact and influence through these channels countries such as Russia? I went to Iraq over the weekend and went to west Mosul on Saturday. I have never seen such a level of devastation, killing and despair. It feels as if the war ended last night, not last year, because so little has been done. One thing that particularly struck me was the destruction of universities, churches, mosques and so on. Thousands of young people and children have been exposed to a particularly brutal existence for three years. I wonder whether the British Council is doing anything in that area or has any plans. I encourage us to get engaged through it or through any other means. That would mean an enormous amount to all of them.

Sir Ciarán Devane: If I may take that specifically, we have just started back in Mosul with two programmes. Some of you may be familiar with our active citizens work in which we train young people to take on programmes to help their community. We have just started a version of that focusing on the enrolment of girls and disabled children in school. The second one we have just started is worth about €15 million [€14.7 million] and is around primary and secondary school education and training teachers and the school system in Mosul in not how you build a school but how you run a school well that will deliver good educational outcomes. We have just put our toes back into that water. Our team in Iraq would endorse everything you have said. We hope the larger project—the €15 million project—will have some good impact, but it is

⁸ University of Edinburgh (2018), Soft Power Today. Available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/3418_bc_edinburgh_university_soft_power_report_03b.pdf

just one component of what needs to happen in one city. We will have the same conversation about Syria one day, I am sure.

It might be worth me telling you about the current situation in Russia. We had 33 people working in Russia—

The Chairman: How many? Did you say 32?

Sir Ciarán Devane: It was 33. Our Director was jointly the Director of the British Council and the Cultural Counsellor at the Embassy. He is still in that role. The British Council per se has shut its doors on the building, but eight of our staff have been employed by the embassy. The conversation we are having with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow is that it is very keen for our programmes to continue. It believes in cultural relations. It absolutely believes that keeping the cultural, educational and science doors open between the UK and Russia is a good thing because it avoids an Iron Curtain-type situation, sustains relationships and prepares for a different future time.

I do not see the issues we had in Moscow as being the limits of what we do. I think they show the benefits of what we are doing, not only because it has shown that doors are kept open and that connecting young people and organisations in Russia with young people and organisations in the UK continues to be really important. I have been trying to make sure that each year we have a Year of something with Russia. We have had a Year of Language and Literature and a Year of Science and I am hopeful that we will continue to do a Year of Music starting next year to keep those doors open and keep those conversations going because in the same way that there is no monolithic, homogenous United Kingdom, there is no monolithic, homogenous Russia.

The will for engagement at very senior levels across Russia continues, so I am hopeful. I would like to be able to say to you that 80% of what we were doing will be done, but it will be done by the team in the embassy. Then we can support as the British Council from outside, or whatever the right phrase is.

Baroness Helic: How does Russia conceive of its soft power, and how does that manifest itself?

Sir Ciarán Devane: There are many bits to this. Lord Jopling referred to it. Russia is very proud of its science, its education and its culture and likes to be respected for its science, education and culture and works hard and well to make engagements. Our “years of” are reciprocal. My favourite example was that, at one point last year, we had a Shakespeare train on the Moscow metro and a Russia train on the Circle line here in London. We try to make things reciprocal, so one carriage was science, another carriage was space, another carriage was ballet and whatever. There is a very similar view in the arts space, certainly.

Lord Grocott: This is a soft-power question. Like a third of the population of the United Kingdom, on Monday I was watching the football

match. That is a staggering figure. One of the amazing factors reported by so many journalists was the extent to which the Russian crowd was rooting for the English team. I do not want to build a castle on sand, but you would think, would you not, that at a state level the relationship between Britain and Russia is probably as bad as it has been since the Cold War, for all sorts of good reasons?

However, at a people level, it does not seem to be the case. To put it crudely, Britain is working to put the Russian economy in difficulties. We are applying sanctions for all the reasons we know. You would think that Russian people might not be too struck on that. I do not know how much you can draw from a game of football, but the people relationship seems to be rather different from the state relationship. You were talking about a year of culture, a year of this and a year of that. May be we should have a year of football. Does it happen a lot in your work that the state relationships seem hopeless, but the people do not seem to be quite so hostile to one another?

Sir Ciarán Devane: I shall say two things. In the work we do, football is a great example. When we work with the premiership here—the English Premier League—and for example take Newcastle United coaches to Cairo and train coaches from Sudan and Tunisia, it is hugely impactful because we are using a cultural resource of the UK, but it is the common humanity. We are all human beings, we are all in this; this is the bit where we are very similar. One of the privileges of what we do is that we do that: we connect people who are fascinated by football, education, science or whatever. It shows that relationships in society at a people-to-people and organisation-to-organisation level are distinct from state-to-state work.

A major part of good cultural relations and soft power is the recognition of that. The work which the Scottish Government do in Malawi is distinct from the relationship of the United Kingdom to Malawi. It is additive. It is in the complexity that the richness of the relationship develops and people understand each other. I was struck by the same thing. I saw an interview on a news bulletin with an England football fan who said that the people in Volgograd had been wonderful and that they were lovely and so welcoming. That gentleman knowing that is important, and I am sure that the people in Volgograd having met him—a good English football fan—will also have an impact.

That is what it is about. It is adding depth, colour and authenticity below the headlines to the relationships between the people of one country and the people of another. I think you are absolutely right. I was struggling for what should come after the year of music, so thank you for the idea of a year of football with Russia.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: You said very perceptively that Russia is not just Moscow but a whole lot of different regional centres and so on. Presumably what you have had to do in rebadging, as it were, most of your staff as members of the embassy cultural section and closing, if I understand it rightly, in St Petersburg has greatly inhibited giving effect

to reaching out to the regions.

Sir Ciarán Devane: We stopped entirely when the instruction came. We have just done the move. Everybody was let go, and eight of the 33 have been recruited by the embassy. I think we will be able to continue to work outside Moscow, if that is a version of the question, with partners. It might be more difficult. We might have to do it in a different way, but I would like to believe that 80% of what we do we will be able to continue to do, because our relationships are not only in one city. We will have a capacity issue. I am not sure we will necessarily have anything that absolutely stops us reaching out across Russia.

One of the great things about the last year was Sir Ian McKellen headlining festivals in Moscow, St Petersburg and Ekaterinburg and talking about Shakespeare and about rights as well. I am cautiously optimistic. It will take us a while to reboot, I am sure, so there will be a hiatus, but we know that our partners on the other side, and I would include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in this, are saying they would like to find ways to continue.

Q146 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** To follow up the question from Lady Helic, Lady Anelay and I were not that long ago in Baghdad and as a follow-up I had the opportunity of meeting your country director Iraq and was very impressed with the work that is starting to be done in Mosul. It is much needed. My question has two parts. First, do you feel that we are assertive enough? You mentioned that young people in the Nineveh region are a priority area. We know that for rebuilding and reconstructing societies there is an immense need for young people in the region. If we are looking at it very pragmatically, there is potentially an unmissable opportunity for the UK to be seen to make long-term impacts for reconciliation and restructuring societies with open curricula, retraining teachers and having young people educated again. Are we assertive? Are we being ambitious enough, and are we putting sufficient resource in to do that?

Secondly, and correct me if I am wrong, my understanding of our work for education in Baghdad is that it is an EU-funded scheme so—forgive me for reverting back to Brexit—how confident are you that the British Council will continue to be able to be a deliverer for EU schemes post exit or, indeed, be able to partner with other countries that have more restrictive contractual requirements about organisations having to be based within the EU to deliver such valuable schemes as we are currently delivering? Clearly, the British Council and the UK are very trusted deliverers. How confident are you that that will be able to carry on?

Sir Ciarán Devane: Confident might be too strong. We have a couple of advantages. One is that we have a status called pagoda status which organisations such as UNESCO have as well. You do not have to be within a European institution to bid under pagoda status. It is more complicated than that, but if you have two equal bids, with us not in and the other in, which way might it go? However, there is no structural reason why we will not be able to continue to bid for contracts, and if there is a structural

reason, I am sure I will find a way around it with my colleagues. We have a foundation based in Poland, for example.

There is an unmissable need, as well as opportunity, if that makes sense, to do more with education ministries across that region. Some of it is helping with school curricula, some of it is technical and vocational education and some of it is skills for employability: project management, communication, digital, critical thinking and so on. We know we can work at scale.

I was in Tripoli in Libya recently, working with the Ministry of Education there supporting female civil servants from across the country with empowerment or confidence and with skills to help them operate in that society. There is a will among many of the ministries and parties that we work with to do it. The post-Arab spring generation has an expectation that things will change in a good way, and as the UK we have many of the assets and the respect to do that, and we know it works.

If you will forgive me one anecdote, Lord Chairman, when I was there I met someone who was involved in counterterrorism. He said, "I have a story to tell you. There was a young man who went to fight for Daesh. His fiancée was interviewed by the authorities and asked why she didn't go. She said, 'Well, there were two reasons. The first was that my parents always taught me that Islam was the religion of peace, and the second one was that I was taking part in a British Council debate on the Wednesday and I wasn't going to miss it'". That is back to my alternative options thing. Where we help young people engage with things that will help them and their community move forward, the attractiveness of the other story is hugely diminished.

I describe what we do in those environments as a public health intervention. Someone else might be doing the surgery or the chemotherapy, but we are doing the public health. If we can work with societies and communities to reduce the population out of which vulnerable people can be led astray, we are doing our job. The inquiry, which you will be familiar with, which the all-party group was doing was really looking at that—at what are the interventions which will change the societal drivers or the economic drivers or could create the environment out of which people who are less resilient can be led in a particular direction—and we know it works.

The Chairman: Sir Ciarán, we have kept you for well over an hour. Your answers to our many questions have been really valuable. We regard your organisation, the British Council, as enormously important in the panoply of British international relations, and my personal view—and I think it is the view of my colleagues—is that it will become more so. This is a growing feature of international relations in the new digital age. Thank you very much for guiding us through both the problems and the challenges. We are extremely grateful to you and wish you well in the future.

Sir Ciarán Devane: You are very welcome. Thank you very much. It was a privilege.