

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Global Britain: FCO Skills, HC 1254

Wednesday 5 September 2018

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Ian Austin; Chris Bryant; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Ian Murray; Andrew Rosindell; Mr Bob Seely; and Royston Smith.

Questions 32-102

Witnesses

I: Jon Benjamin, Director of Diplomatic Academy, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; right hon. Sir Alan Duncan KCMG, Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Angus Lapsley, Director of Defence, International Security and South East Europe, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; and Victoria Smith, Head of Talent and Capability, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(SKI0004\)](#)
- [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(SKI0017\)](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jon Benjamin, Sir Alan Duncan, Angus Lapsley and Victoria Smith.

Q32 Chair: Welcome, everyone, to the first Foreign Affairs Committee session after the recess.

Thank you very much for coming, Minister, and thank you, Mr Benjamin, Ms Smith and Mr Lapsley. This is an inquiry into the FCO's skills agenda, but, given that you are here and your leadership on the recent Western Balkans summit, may I start off with a side question, as it were, on the proposal of a land swap between Serbia and Kosovo? What is Her Majesty's Government's position on that land swap?

Sir Alan Duncan: First, thank you for your inquiry and report into the summit. We were very pleased with what happened and we are grateful to you for watching it and commenting on it.

Obviously, what is happening is that there is talk of a possible land swap between Serbia and Kosovo. We have spent a long time working very closely with both countries and obviously have been trying to develop good relations over the last 20 years—particularly with Kosovo, where we intervened in 1999.

We do not really know the precise nature and exact details of the ideas the two Presidents are discussing, but any approach that rested on land swaps or partition or border adjustments would raise some very deep and serious concerns. There has been a well considered and planned settlement in a very, very difficult area, and if suddenly there are movements in the jigsaw that try to create mono-ethnic areas and could, in extremis, lead to the movement of people—even the forced movement of people, which is utterly unthinkable in a modern European setting—that would cause very serious consequences.

Our position is that we have got very deep concerns. We are expressing caution. We are very much hand in hand with the Germans in the tone that we are adopting on this. We are aware of slightly differently graduated approaches to this from the Americans and the Europeans. We don't want to have a spat with any of them but we would like to use our experience in the region to point out our deep concern about the dangers we think any seemingly simple swap would entail.

When it comes to Presidents Thaçi and Vučić, at embassy level we are trying to find out exactly what is happening and we will engage them as best we can. Angus Lapsley, Director for Defence, International Security and South East Europe at the Foreign Office, has been deeply engaged in the detail; perhaps he could add to what I have said, in case I have missed anything.



Angus Lapsley: Thank you for setting out the essentials. The one thing I would add is that the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo has been going on for some years now. It is important to both countries' progressing towards the European Union. If they are going to progress towards the European Union, they have got to do so in respect for European values. European values in the Balkans for some time now have been about preserving the constitutional status quo between the countries and promoting the principle of multi-ethnicity. I think there is a values question here.

The second issue is that what we have tried to do with the dialogue over the years—and it has been difficult—is try to promote broader co-operation between Serbia and Kosovo. There is a whole range of issues such as energy, rule of law, culture, telecoms and transport where there are masses of really practical issues that should be sorted out that would improve the quality of life for the people who live there. Our feeling is that those are the issues that both Serbia and Kosovo ought to be trying to focus on and tackling with the support of the European Union.

The last thing I would say is that, obviously, at the end of the day, it is for two sovereign countries to decide what they want to discuss and agree together, but the international community would have a very big interest in the deliverability and implementation of any kind of agreement like this. We do have a NATO force in Kosovo, KFOR, with about 4,000 troops. They would be at the front line of trying to deal with this. Those of us who contribute to these forces and are responsible for security in the region, whether in the EU, NATO or the UN, have to take this very seriously.

- Q33 **Chair:** You have answered very clearly there. There is a great concern to me, and other members of the Committee, that land swaps can create precedents and can lead to ideas of single-ethnic states that can become extremely dangerous and self-perpetuating. They can also set a precedent for other areas where people can claim a land swap has occurred; I am thinking particularly of the invasion of Crimea, for example, or indeed the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia.

Could I just register my very deep concern on this issue? I welcome very much what you have said. Does anyone else wish to comment?

Sir Alan Duncan: We share your view on this. It is not just precedent and the likes of Ukraine. You can go closer to home—to Macedonia, for instance, where there would be questions about the Albanian community. So even within the region, this could have knock-on effects, which we think could be seriously detrimental.

- Q34 **Chris Bryant:** You mentioned Macedonia. Obviously, we are hopeful that there is going to be a resolution of the name issue and so on. The Greeks have got very angry with the Russians and named people whom they have thrown out of the country for trying to interfere in the business and corrupt officials in Greece. Would you like to tell us where that is moving and whether you think the Russians are engaged in this as well?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Alan Duncan: I think we are all full of admiration for the manner in which the name issue has been resolved in principle. It is subject to the referendum that is imminent in Macedonia. I hope to visit before referendum day—not to interfere, but to encourage.

We would not like to pass judgment at the moment on whether there is Russian interference of that sort, but I can assure you that we are watching the situation very closely because there are serious precedents for such interference not far away—in Montenegro, to name but one.

I very much hope that the people of Macedonia will vote for this very enlightened agreement, which will put to bed an issue that has been festering for so long. If they do, the world will applaud the decision, if it turns out as positive as I hope it will.

Q35 **Chair:** Thank you very much for that, Minister. We now come to the skills inquiry that we initially invited you to.

Sir Alan Duncan: If it is all right, Angus Lapsley will go now. It is quite a busy day for anyone involved in his field at the moment, as you will appreciate.

Chair: Of course. Thank you very much for coming, Mr Lapsley. We appreciate your work very much.

Although I know this is not specifically your area, Minister, may I just put on the record my congratulations and gratitude for the work the Foreign Office has done in co-ordinating the international response to this Russian attack on the UK? Could you also pass on to the agencies for which you have ministerial responsibility my enormous gratitude for the enormous amounts of work they have put into nailing, very clearly, an extremely hostile act by a foreign state?

Sir Alan Duncan: Thank you. We will convey that exactly as you have said it. It is well deserved. I am amazed by the quality of the detective work, but I also think the initial diplomatic response was second to none and, crucially, the logic we put in public about what we thought had happened has endured and stood the test of time. It proved itself to be absolutely spot on by today's announcement.

Q36 **Mr Seely:** Minister, in this day and age, what do you think is the purpose of British diplomacy?

Sir Alan Duncan: We are the global-facing, global-reaching apparatus for British interests through our activity abroad, but I also think we have a wider purpose, which is to bring to that wider world one of the most impressive skills in the Foreign Office: intellectual integrity. That means that our judgments are invariably fair, rational, based on the rule of law and fundamentally rooted in decency, and therefore are trusted. I think the Foreign Office presents the United Kingdom across the world for all those purposes, and does so in a very effective and indeed unique way.

I do not think that I have properly introduced my flankers, as it were. On my right we have Jon Benjamin, who is the Director of our Diplomatic



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Academy, and on my left is Vicky Smith, Head of Talent and Capability in the Foreign Office.

- Q37 **Mr Seely:** Can I ask a couple of follow-up questions? Thank you for that very full answer. How do non-state actors fit in—the role of culture, other activities or businesses—and how do the pressures of transparency on the Foreign Office change the nature of the Foreign Office now, simply because so much of one's opinions of other countries is formed not only from official bodies in those states, but from unofficial bodies and indeed from people who one reads and follows on the internet?

Sir Alan Duncan: When you talk about the influence of non-state actors, in what sense?

- Q38 **Mr Seely:** You are a part of official Britain, but so much of our identity is shaped not by official Britain but by all the other bits of Britain—whether it is the English football team, British fashion or culture and shows on television. I do not mean non-state actors such as ISIS, but non-state actors such as football and things like that.

Sir Alan Duncan: The ambassador in any country is the pinnacle of the embassy and the mission, and that mission, depending on the country you are in, can embrace many facets. It will embrace, obviously, our intelligence agencies, defence interests, cultural and trade interests in particular—trade interests, increasingly—and a large part of the work of any ambassador and his or her team is to promote the cultural side of Britain. There will be academic and other educational and sporting events that are promoted.

The GREAT campaign, which has been running now for a number of years, encapsulates all those elements of British life. It is not just about sitting down with counterpart Ministers and saying, "This is what Britain thinks. What do you think?" It is about promoting wider British interests.

One of the main principles of our diplomatic effort is to say that we take a cross-Whitehall, cross-sector, cross-the-whole-country approach to the efforts we will make in a country where we are represented. Can I just add that the British Council, for instance, is an example of that? They work hand in hand with us, as, of course—in appropriate countries—does DfID.

- Q39 **Chair:** May I suggest, then, that your line is very much that you are co-ordinating the strategic approach of the British Government abroad in all its manors? I would very much hope that you would see yourself as the lead Department for other areas, including actually defence, trade and various other things, in the sense that you are co-ordinating that function—I do not mean that you are necessarily delivering it because you may not be delivering the aid or the defence or whatever it happens to be, but you are co-ordinating it.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes. To put it in simple language, the ambassador in any capital is the boss and runs the system, within which, depending on the needs and the focus we have, there will be a larger or smaller defence element, or a larger or smaller trade element. Each country will be

balanced according to the priorities set for it. We are the host platform, if you like, and the ambassador is the pinnacle.

- Q40 **Mr Seely:** I have a couple of follow-ups. You said “trade increasingly”. Do you think that will increase further after Brexit? Do you think it should increase further, and will it be at the expense of other elements of what we do?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, it will not be “at the expense”, because it will largely be Department for International Trade people, in that we have a whole dedicated Department for this, and obviously a lot more activity will be bilateral where it has to replace an EU-to-another-country relationship. In addition to the obvious direct efforts of DIT people themselves, an ambassador will probably spend a lot of time promoting British contracts whenever they can, so I think this will increase. We have—we have discussed this before in this Committee—allocated more resources to increasing the number of people in certain embassies. I am sure a lot of that will be focused on our trade needs.

Can I ask my officials to chip in please if I am missing anything and if the chair is happy for you to do so?

- Q41 **Royston Smith:** Minister, can you explain the process that went into producing the FCO’s priority skills statement, and how do you go about judging what are the most important skills?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes. I think I will defer to Jon Benjamin if I may because its design and publication predated me. He is absolutely on top of this because it is so pertinent to his work in the Diplomatic Academy.

Jon Benjamin: Thank you, Minister.

The skills statement was set out in annex 4 to the original memorandum we put through. As you are aware, there was a report into the FCO’s future—Tom Fletcher was very much involved in designing that. There was a process of consultation up to the FCO board to look at the comprehensive summary of the most essential skills that the diplomatic service and all those operating on the Government platform overseas would need for the foreseeable future.

That was a mixture of geographical knowledge and expertise in all the main regions in the world; core diplomatic skills such as negotiating, influencing and building networks; leadership skills for the type of role that an ambassador has, which the Minister has described; and linguistic skills. It then had a look at the professional skills that we would need more and more in future. Diplomats have tended to be seen as generalists rather than specialists, but we have increasing need for expertise in digital diplomacy, project and programme management overseas, and so on.

There was then a process of summarising that in as short a way as possible as a way for colleagues, as their careers develop in the diplomatic service, to know which areas they should look to be developing in.



- Q42 Royston Smith:** It is called the priority skills statement 2020. How do you think diplomatic skills might change over the next decade, and what is the FCO doing about planning for that? The Minister mentioned last time about using WhatsApp, which was very quaint—I don't think WhatsApp will be as big a platform in 10 years' time as it is now, but I don't know.

Sir Alan Duncan: Inevitably, some practices change because of communications and technological advance. Ambassadors do tweet, and that is a way of conveying a message. In a way, that is a skill—you can tweet badly or tweet well—but fundamentally, it is the same skills there have always been: good fact-gathering and analysis; good relationships; and knowing the politics, economy, risks, dangers and opportunities of the country you are in. I do not think that those are ever fundamentally going to change.

One thing that has changed, I would say, over the last few decades is the speed of travel, which means that a lot of the relationships are conducted more regularly at the highest level. A Prime Minister will see a Prime Minister, whereas before the ambassador would see a country's Prime Minister, and our own Prime Minister would see that person only rarely. The speed of travel means that more relationships are conducted at a personal level more frequently than there have been. The days are gone when it was Churchill winding up the telephone to speak across the Atlantic. Now you have regular video conferences and all that kind of stuff.

Connectivity has changed the nature of diplomacy and made people closer to people in terms of communications a bit but, in the end, on the ground, in any country, you need those relationships.

- Q43 Royston Smith:** May I ask our two diplomats about languages? Are we increasing now—I believe we are—how many people are being taught languages? To what level? Has that been neglected over the last few years?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think it had been. It was going into dangerous decline but has been significantly revived. William Hague when he was Foreign Secretary invested a lot of effort in restoring proper language skills. Actually, we have a very, very strong reputation across the world for having diplomats who speak the local language. It is very good. We are behind a little bit on Arabic at the moment, but ahead on some others—Jon has the analysis of this more precisely than I have.

Jon Benjamin: I am not sure, Mr Smith, if a few figures would be useful at this point. I agree very much with the Minister that it is an area that we neglected. That was demonstrated by closing the language school for a number of years.

What we have now is a process where each geographical area in the Foreign Office looks once a year with us at the requirement for the number of people in each post who speak the language to a very good level—we are talking level C1 or C2, mostly—against the common European framework. Some would say that that is degree level, but really we are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

talking about functional fluency, to enable them to negotiate and establish contacts without the need for interpretation.

At the moment, we have just over 500 slots worldwide—513, as of today—that are designated as speaker slots. When the job description is published internally for colleagues to bid, it is set out clearly that reaching a specific level in the language concerned is a requirement of the job, and the necessary period to study the language to that level is integrated into the planning period so that they have a chance to get to that level before arriving at post.

Of those 513, well over half—about 330 at the moment—are in our priority languages. Our memorandum sets out the priority 1 and 2 languages, but it includes Arabic, French, Chinese, Russian, Spanish and others.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is Mandarin Chinese.

Jon Benjamin: Yes.

As of today, we are actively teaching 46 languages in different forms to different audiences within the Office. The company that won the tender for teaching in foreign languages through our language school is contracted to teach up to 85 languages as and when necessary. Just to explain, there are some very small posts around the world where we may have one speaker who is replaced every four years or so. That requirement only comes up irregularly, in some cases, but we have the ability to teach those languages as necessary.

Q44 **Royston Smith:** How do you keep people current when they move? If you are an Arabic specialist but you are moved to the UN on secondment, how do you keep their language current? How do they keep their language current?

Jon Benjamin: I do not think there is a single answer to that question, Mr Smith, to be honest. It partly depends on the motivation of the individual. Very often, colleagues will be looking, further on in their career, to be posted back to the same country or region, so they have their own career interest in maintaining that.

We offer optional language training, as well as the more compulsory language training tied to the job, in Russian, Arabic, Chinese and other languages, precisely for colleagues to keep up their language ability. There is no obligation on them to do so, as such, other than that when they next want to be posted in that region, the job specification that they are aiming for—perhaps at a higher level—will spell out the level they are supposed to reach. They will be expected to retake an exam that they may have taken many years before to prove that they are at the right level.

Q45 **Chair:** The numbers are still relatively low. I know that Russian is now hitting 53% of the target. Is that correct?

Jon Benjamin: It is correct, Mr Tugendhat. Obviously, there is a bit of hiatus because of what has happened with our embassy—



Sir Alan Duncan: There is a bit of a hitch at the moment.

- Q46 **Chair:** I understand that it is a slightly different case. Is the ambition too high for some of these languages? Is the target too high? Or is it that we are not getting the pipeline through?

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not think that it is too high. Russia is a special case. Where we do not have the slots, we have to keep the skill set alive. Where people have been declared PNG, it is difficult for them to go back, so they have to go to other Russian-speaking countries. There is a potential problem there in the streamlined progress we have planned for.

- Q47 **Chair:** There is a bit of an issue in Arabic, too, I believe. I think I am right in saying that the figure is about 50% in Arabic.

Jon Benjamin: It has actually fallen below that. It was 50% a year ago, and with the turnover of staff it has fallen below that.

- Q48 **Chair:** I know the Minister prioritises Arabic. You take it very seriously, I know. I am just curious to know whether you think that we are over-bidding for linguistic slots or under-producing speakers.

Sir Alan Duncan: When you say over-bidding for speaking slots, what do you mean?

- Q49 **Chair:** Are we too ambitious in the number of diplomats that we hope will speak Arabic, and therefore 50% is more realistic than 100%, if you see what I mean?

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not think we are too ambitious, because I think it is good to be ambitious. I do not know what the exact reasons are for the percentage. It depends on how we measure it. Sometimes it is because they do speak the language, but they just have not passed the exam. It may pop out as a slightly low statistic, but the attainment is there; it is just that in terms of being able to communicate, the exam qualification has not quite caught up with the learning. Is that fair?

- Q50 **Chair:** As somebody who was an Arabic interpreter for the British Army, I can tell you that I was never a qualified Arabic interpreter for the British Army.

Jon Benjamin: The first point about the target is a challenging and reasonable one. The target is that by 2020, 80% of all the officers who are out there in the field in a designated speaker slot should have passed the level designated at the outset, which will very often be C1 or C2.

- Q51 **Chair:** Is there a resourcing element that could be increased, or is it just that it takes time to do this?

Jon Benjamin: Rather than a resourcing thing, there is an element of greater discipline by ourselves. There was a tendency for people in their language training to be pulled out to post a little early, because of requirements there, before they had had the chance to finish. We are being much stricter about making sure that people do that.¹ We need to,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and we have, become stricter about reminding colleagues of the obligation on them to take their exam, and about writing to heads of mission to say, "You must have a plan in place so that all of your speakers do take the exam," rather than letting it slide, which may have been the case in the past.

Q52 **Chair:** The Minister's introduction on diplomacy was very clear: languages matter.

Q53 **Chris Bryant:** On the back of that, what is the ministerial team like in terms of foreign languages?

Sir Alan Duncan: The Foreign Secretary speaks fluent Japanese. I have very rusty A-level French. I need a short, sharp immersion course to restore it. I think those are our language skills. I do not know if Lord Ahmad has a language, other than English. I don't think Mark Field and Alistair Burt have a second language. It is not a prerequisite.

Q54 **Chris Bryant:** I want to ask about other skills. Mr Benjamin, you referred to Tom Fletcher. Tom has obviously written a very interesting book, which is much touted around the world. One thing he refers to is the ability to take risks. You were quite good at taking risks when you were in Chile and other places, not least getting people out of prison occasionally, or out of trouble. I wonder how you make sure that diplomats are able to take risks that pay off.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think this is about leadership from Ministers. My very strong view is that you never criticise someone for making a mistake if they have made that mistake out of the best of intentions. It may be because they have taken a risk. I applaud initiative.

I think that being overcautious and overthinking things to the point of blandness shows a lack of leadership. Certainly my ministerial style is to be enormously supportive of ambassadors and, indeed, their teams who take initiative in our interests. The answer to your question is that, by and large, the tone comes from the top. It is up to us to inject the right sort of attitude into our officials and diplomats.

Q55 **Chris Bryant:** I completely agree with that. I just wonder, in the analysis of what is happening in relation to bullying, for instance, around the diplomatic network, which has historically been a problem, whether that seeps down further into the organisation. If not, what are you doing to tackle that?

Sir Alan Duncan: This is a fundamental HR issue, which I would like to think the Foreign Office has tackled very thoroughly, so that anyone who feels they are being abused or bullied can say so and speak out in a way that is properly structured. I do not know whether Vicky wants to add to that on the process.

¹ Note from witness, should read as: 'We are being much stricter about making sure that people do not do that.'

Victoria Smith: Our scores for people reporting being bullied, harassed or discriminated against are far higher than we deem acceptable. It is something we take very seriously. Indeed, we report to the management board once a year what we are doing about it.

There is no straightforward or simple answer because everybody's experience is different, but we have a number of things in place. We have training on the issues to help people understand what bullying, harassment and discrimination is and what they can do about it. We have really robust processes in place so that people can report any experiences of these things and get help. We will address that seriously in the organisation.

We also have a network of first response officers around the world in all posts, who individuals can go and talk to in confidence and get help that way. There are a number of things we are doing to really lean into this problem, and leadership development is one of those.

Q56 **Chris Bryant:** Is sexual harassment part of the numbers you do as well?

Victoria Smith: Yes, we would consider sexual harassment.

Q57 **Chris Bryant:** What are the numbers like on that?

Victoria Smith: Within our people survey, we do not specify sexual harassment, so I couldn't tell you, of the people who report this in our people survey, how many are referring to sexual harassment. What we have done is look deeply at this issue, because of the #MeToo campaign and other publicity around it. We have encouraged an extensive dialogue across the organisation. There are obviously anecdotal cases—we are a large organisation—and we take those very seriously.

Q58 **Chris Bryant:** How many in the last year?

Victoria Smith: I can write to you with that information.

Chris Bryant: I would be grateful.

Sir Alan Duncan: Can we flip back to risk-taking, because I rather cut Jon Benjamin off?

Jon Benjamin: Mr Bryant, that is a key issue. Traditionally, and not just in the UK, there is a bit of a symbiotic relationship between day-to-day diplomacy and being a bit risk-averse. Therefore, to become more courageous in taking calculated risks there needs to be, as the Minister said, a message from the top. It means that in our embassies, the heads of mission and deputy heads of mission have to give the message that it is all right to take risks and experiment.

Importantly, in that area and in the whole area of bullying and harassment, one of our main transmission mechanisms is a course we run in the Diplomatic Academy about seven or eight times a year for all our deputy heads of mission and heads of mission before they go out, including if they are doing it for a second or third time, where we have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

previous heads of mission describe experiments they have done and risks they have taken that have worked or have not worked.

We use that course to get across the message that it is their job to make sure that if there are any bullying, harassment or discrimination problems in the post they are going to, it is up to them to deal with them. We give a similar message, in fact, on learning and development in its entirety—that the message and the tone comes from the leader of each of our missions. They should be appraised, and when their annual evaluation comes up, that should be one of the factors that is commented on.

- Q59 **Chris Bryant:** It just feels like this has been around for a long time now and the numbers have not changed very much in the last 12 years, from what I have seen. One final thing, which is about the leaving letters that ambassadors send—

Sir Alan Duncan: The valedictories, yes.

- Q60 **Chris Bryant:** As a part of history, they have been a fascinating aspect of our work. Sometimes a bit of truth telling happens then that could not have happened at any other time. I wonder what your feeling is about that.

Sir Alan Duncan: My personal feeling is that the valedictory telegrams, or diptels, as they are now called—diplomatic telegrams—were an absolutely wonderful little nugget of history, which it has been very sad to lose. Some of them were leaked and caused embarrassment. Well, they were designed to be leaked—let's face it.

What is the point of writing them? You are telling the world what you really think. I think we should be far more relaxed about valedictories and encourage them, and stick them on frames all the way along the wall. Some of them are absolutely beautifully crafted—they contain decades of distilled wisdom and perceptions—and if they are a little bit rude occasionally about a Minister, we should just take that on the chin.

- Q61 **Chris Bryant:** So you are reinstating them, as of now.

Chair: Have you spoken to the Secretary of State about this?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have not yet spoken to the Foreign Secretary about this. I am merely expressing my opinion.

Chair: You have the full support of the Committee.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am sure I do. I do not know if they will ever come back, but—

Chris Bryant: Take a risk!

Sir Alan Duncan: I have a number of times in my life. The diplomatic telegram, as an instrument, is quite the most wonderful process of both information flow and record. I digest them voraciously. I think they are very well crafted by our missions abroad.



Q62 Mike Gapes: May I ask you about post-Brexit trade policy and our diplomacy? What new skills would the FCO need if the UK—when the UK—leaves the European Union, in terms of diplomacy in Brussels and bilateral diplomacy with other European countries? How are you preparing for that?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will ask Jon Benjamin to go into some of the deeper detail about how we are crafting an independent trade policy, which of course we have not had for four decades.

Mike Gapes: I will come on to trade.

Sir Alan Duncan: Okay. There are perhaps two levels to this. One is the promotion and the lobbying for contracts and things in Britain's interest, which we are doing all the time anyway. In a way, that is not going to change. It will need to be enhanced, because it is going to be a major focus of policy. The other, of course, is trade deals as such—you know, the free trade agreements with whatever countries we might be negotiating with. They will of course need a wider cross-Whitehall competence, largely vested in the Department for International Trade, but increasingly also resting within the Foreign Office in its skillset. Jon can perhaps add to that more specifically.

Jon Benjamin: The first answer is that there are quite a few new skills that our diplomats and heads of mission will need in future, because when you are out in the field, so much of trade policy has been the remit of the local now EEAS representation. Knowledge around tariffs and quotas, standards, customs and so on, is something that we need, and are going to need, much more than during the period when that was effectively an EU competence.

On the main thing we have done on infrastructure to start teaching all this, very soon after the referendum, about two years ago, we somewhat unexpectedly created a further faculty in the Diplomatic Academy—the Trade Policy and Negotiations faculty—and worked up a curriculum extremely quickly. That has meant a pipeline of people trained in a way we did not use to, including a core of about 90 people so far who have been trained to expert level. That effectively means, we hope, that they are ready to negotiate the nuts and bolts of UK independent trade agreements in future.

Q63 Mike Gapes: The memo that we were sent said that the aim was to have trained at least 240 people to expert level by March 2019. If only 90 have been trained to that level so far, is that a realistic target? Will we get to 240 by March next year?

Jon Benjamin: The target is certainly challenging, but if it was not I would ask whether we were being demanding enough on ourselves. Certainly, the throughput of people will, we hope, get us to that target figure even if the date has to slip a little. That is what we are aiming for in numbers of people—not just from the FCO, but from DExEU, the Department for International Trade and so on. They are currently going through the training.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Alan Duncan: I should add that we have a contract with Linklaters, which has assembled top-flight experts who will be the main part of the teaching. The quality of the teaching and skills being imparted is very high. Vicky was going to add something on this.

Victoria Smith: I wanted to come in on your question about EU exit and what that means for our European bilateral missions and also in Brussels. As the Minister said, this is obviously about our existing skills—the influencing, the networking and the public diplomacy—but we are reinforcing our bilateral missions in UKRep with additional roles, so that we are able to pick that up and make sure that they have not just the capability but the capacity to deliver against that challenge.

Q64 **Mike Gapes:** Does that reinforcement, as with a previous inquiry that the Committee did, include bringing people back from elsewhere in the world to reinforce some European posts and a rebalancing within the FCO, so that to some extent Global Britain has become more European?

Victoria Smith: As far as I am aware, we have not actually brought anybody back from a posting elsewhere beyond their natural end of tour date. What we have done is create new roles and then move people out of London. It is really rebalancing in terms of moving people out of Whitehall and into our missions overseas—particularly in Europe.

Sir Alan Duncan: The key point about the trade people is that they need to be ready for when we need to be ready—whenever, as it were, the start date is when we can go and start negotiating all these things.

Q65 **Mike Gapes:** And that is not necessarily March 2019—it could be after the end of 2020 or maybe much later.

Sir Alan Duncan: These specific details will be notified in due course.

Q66 **Mike Gapes:** What exactly do you mean by “expert” and “expert level” in the context of trade?

Jon Benjamin: Basically, that means people who are ready to negotiate the immense detail that goes into free trade agreements. We have had to go from a standing start to get people to that level in very quick time. They, of course, will be dealing with counterpart officials in other countries who may have been doing this for many years, perhaps exclusively so. So an expert in these terms is someone capable of negotiating all the nuts and bolts of a free trade agreement for the UK.

Sir Alan Duncan: A very highly qualified person, Lisa Mackie, is dean of the Trade Policy and Negotiations faculty within the Diplomatic Academy. She has 14 years of experience working for the Director General for Trade at the European Commission.

Q67 **Mike Gapes:** She is training the experts, presumably, but as Mr Benjamin said, potentially we will have newly trained novices going into negotiations bilaterally with people on the other side who have years of experience.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, but as I think the Linklaters contract illustrates, there are experts in the UK other than those who work for the Foreign Office.

- Q68 **Mike Gapes:** Okay. Can I ask you about the way in which the training works? Are all the people trained in the same way, or do you have specific areas of focus? For example, do you have people who focus on multilateral trade, others who focus on regional trade policy and others who focus on bilateral trade policy, or is it all one body of training?

Jon Benjamin: The division is more on technical chapters within free trade agreements, so we are training people with a view to having teams of people who are capable of negotiating free trade agreements, within which there will be a lead on customs issues, a lead on standards, and people trained specifically in rules of origin. The idea is to have teams of seven or eight people and several teams so that we are capable of negotiating several agreements at any one time.

- Q69 **Mike Gapes:** And the skills that those people have—is it expertise on a subject or region, or negotiating technique skills? They might be very different.

Jon Benjamin: Sure. The emphasis at the moment is very much on acquiring the expertise in some of the technical sub-heads that I mentioned earlier, but the same officials are of course eligible for our training courses in negotiation skills and so on.

- Q70 **Mike Gapes:** When you say they are eligible, how many of those 90 have had the training in actual negotiating?

Jon Benjamin: I would have to come back to you with a precise figure, which I will do, but the training is set up so that they should be able to dip in and out of other courses, as well as the particular expert areas on which they are majoring.

- Q71 **Mike Gapes:** Minister, you said earlier that you might recruit people who were not necessarily already in the FCO.

Sir Alan Duncan: No, that is not quite what I said. I said that we can draw on expertise, should we need to do so.

- Q72 **Mike Gapes:** All right. Have we made any efforts to recruit British nationals, or even nationals of other countries who currently work in trade-related roles in the European Commission? Are they being poached to come in and do our national work?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have named one.

Jon Benjamin: Yes, as the Minister said, Lisa Mackie, who is the dean of that faculty and is designing most of the training, is the best example. Of course, we have a second Permanent Secretary at the Department for International Trade who is a trade negotiator. Otherwise I am not personally aware of other individuals.

- Q73 **Mike Gapes:** But potentially, then, we will have a gap of expertise, won't



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we? Have we thought about recruiting non-UK nationals who might fill those posts for us? I know that there was some story in the past about people coming from New Zealand. Have we tried to recruit people to get them in in time for those things to happen?

Sir Alan Duncan: This might be more appropriately directed at the Department for International Trade, whose job it is do those things, but as we have described, we are significantly enhancing our capability in the FCO as well.

Mike Gapes: Perhaps you can write to us, or get the other Department to give you information. I assumed it was joined-up government.

Q74 **Chair:** Forgive me, but the FCO pays for the training and therefore oversight is with the Department.

Sir Alan Duncan: We offer the training facility, I think I am right in saying, which other Departments can use.

Jon Benjamin: Actually, most of the money for this particular training is from our budget. There are additional contributions from DIT, for example, but the core budget, which was about £1 million in the last financial year, is from the Diplomatic Academy budget.

Q75 **Chair:** May I ask a specific question on the back of that? You are training people in very marketable skills. We have heard—and this will not be news to you—that the FCO pay structures are not always considered to be up to Whitehall levels. How much concern is there that you are training people who then can quite understandably will take those skills to other very marketable employers?

Sir Alan Duncan: Trade deals are negotiated between countries, but legal advice can be given by law firms and of course is valuable to sectors and companies. Competitive pay rates do matter. It is amazing how many skilled people we have in the Foreign Office who are being paid far less than they could earn outside. Some of our lawyers could be earning three or four times as much, I imagine.

I have to say that I am deeply concerned more generally about the disparity between Foreign Office pay and that in other Departments where the Foreign Office, which needs to be a supremely capable, internationally focused apparatus, is paid less, almost across the board. This is not right. We are having some retention problems and I feel that that is going to grow unless this disparity is addressed.

We have put in a bid to the Treasury for pay flexibility where we can massage the grade payments by agreement with the Treasury. I hope that is accepted, because we need that flexibility.

Q76 **Chair:** You definitely have the support of the Committee in looking very hard at that. You are right that you need to hire some extremely impressive characters, and it would be wrong to suggest they were motivated by money—they would not be in the Foreign Office if they were—and we are very lucky to have hugely talented people working for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

government, in civil service and Crown service positions. We as a nation must pay people appropriately and there is a concern that the Foreign Office is not at the Whitehall levels.

Sir Alan Duncan: I can understand many in the public sector being paid less than they might earn in the private sector—it has always been thus—but for those in one Government Department to be paid in some cases possibly 20% less than someone 50 yards across Whitehall does not strike me as logical or fair.

Chair: You have the support of this Committee.

Q77 **Mr Seely:** How can that be changed? Surely it can be changed with the agreement of the relevant Ministers.

Sir Alan Duncan: It requires deep negotiations with Her Majesty's Treasury.

Q78 **Mr Seely:** So the Treasury is blocking it?

Sir Alan Duncan: In order to address the issue, it needs an agreement with the Chancellor, yes.

Chair: Thank you. You have the support of the Committee.

Q79 **Chris Bryant:** It is about the whole remunerative package as well, though, because there are other things that make it more difficult for people to be able to take on a career in the diplomatic service, such as family responsibilities and so on. Just remind us what has happened to schooling, for instance?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think—officials can correct me if I am wrong—continuity of education in the UK while diplomats are abroad is covered. You are quite right that, as with the Ministry of Defence, you have to look at the whole package for a family living overseas or someone taking a posting overseas. Again, I point to the apparent disparity, in one building, in the same capital, employed by the same government, of a DFID person being paid more than a Foreign Office person.

Q80 **Chris Bryant:** As I understand it, at the moment the Treasury takes the hit for changes in value of foreign exchange, is that right? I have come across a couple of posts where people have said, "But we are still being told that it is X amount of money in local currency that we have to spend on a particular programme."

Sir Alan Duncan: I am doing this entirely from recollection of a conversation a couple of years ago, I think between William Hague and George Osborne, where the overall budget quantum for the Foreign Office was protected against foreign exchange adverse movements. Whether that applies specifically capital to capital to capital, I do not know. I am sure we can come back to that.

Q81 **Chris Bryant:** But if you were in Argentina at the moment for instance, or for that matter, Venezuela—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Alan Duncan: If you are paid in sterling, you are doing all right.

- Q82 **Chris Bryant:** Yes, some would be—British national based—but a lot of our staff in those embassies are not British based, they are locally employed. I wonder what is happening to them. You might not have the answer to hand, but I would be grateful to have it.

Sir Alan Duncan: I would be fascinated, myself, to know. We will pose the question and get back to the Committee with any immediate answers. That is more the finance side of the Foreign Office than the skills side.

Chris Bryant: Indeed.

Jon Benjamin: May I add one point, Mr Tugendhat, on the retention issue? I think you are quite right: there is always the risk across the board, in many areas, that when you invest a lot in increasing the expertise of an individual, they become more marketable outside. We have spoken about languages, for example—

Chair: That is not a reason not to do it.

Jon Benjamin: Of course, but it is a risk that is inbuilt. When we train people to exceptionally high levels of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and so on, opportunities sometimes open up for them for much better salaries outside.

- Q83 **Mr Seely:** Is there a contract by which if you put somebody through Chinese linguistic training, they have to work for you for several years, or can they just walk out as soon as they have got the qualification?

Jon Benjamin: My colleague Vicky Smith knows more on the HR side, but, in short, I think there is only a commitment for the posting you are going on. If you leave that early, there is repayment of certain investments that have been made, but not in the longer term.

Mr Seely: Can I ask a tiny question?

Chair: Go for it!

- Q84 **Mr Seely:** Apologies if I have missed this; if you answered it earlier, just say so. How have the skillsets that you are talking about changed in the last 20 years, or have they not?

Sir Alan Duncan: We sort of covered that from Mr Smith's question, to be honest. In a nutshell, my answer was that the core skills of a diplomat remain the same, but some of the practices have changed a little bit with increased technological connectivity. That is the case both in straightforward communications, and in changing the slight nature of relationships between top-level people, being able to communicate more frequently by phone and video conference, and to hold more frequent meetings and conferences.

Ian Murray: And, of course, we get brilliant Ministers for a pittance; I am sure you will agree.

Sir Alan Duncan: Thank you very much for putting it like that.



Q85 Ian Murray: Can I move on to digital diplomacy? I know that that is an issue that is quite close to the hearts of many people who are in the Foreign Office. Can you give us the Foreign Office's definition of digital diplomacy and how that has changed both communication and training?

Sir Alan Duncan: As you were asking the question, I turned to Mr Benjamin and said, "Give them the definition, please."

Jon Benjamin: We get across in our training that digital diplomacy is certainly a completely new style of communicating diplomatically, but it is the latest iteration of how we do public diplomacy rather than something wholly new and separate from what has gone before. Mr Seely just asked which skills we need now that we did not need 20 or so years ago, and this is one of the most obvious examples. It links to Mr Bryant's point about risk aversion, because—many of us have had personal experience of this—it involves taking a lot more risks than used to be the case.

In the FCO we have about 20 permanent digital data technology specialists, who can help us to deliver that training. We have about 100 people in the network globally who work on digital diplomacy. It is about using the skills in how to use digital to conduct public diplomacy, to influence and to get our view across, and sometimes to speak directly to publics in other countries, rather than just to Governments—sometimes in a way that Governments in certain countries do not like.

We have nine digital communications specialists in the centre here in London. We have developed training around that, and it is something that we also cover in the courses for outgoing deputy heads of mission and heads of mission, giving them examples of where it has worked and where we have made mistakes.

Q86 Ian Murray: Do you specifically tell people in senior positions or sensitive posts to stay away from digital diplomacy, in the sense of social media? Do you say, "Until you have gone through some kind of training, you have to be very careful"?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, quite the opposite. We encourage our ambassadors to tweet, to use their Facebook page and to use modern electronic media to convey their message. Of course, in some cases that takes us into the need to rebut certain things.

In some countries, great conspiracy theories suddenly go a little bit viral. For instance, last year when I was focusing very closely on Turkey, our then ambassador was something of a legend for his digital diplomacy in rebutting a lot of silly things that were going around the Twittersphere. Going back to the language skills, he was doing that in Turkish, extremely well, and had an enormous following. That was a very effective device, which added to the efficacy of our Ankara mission.

Q87 Ian Murray: President Trump uses digital diplomacy: good or bad?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will answer you on Twitter when I have had a moment to think about it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ian Murray: I have just followed you on Twitter this very second, just before asking the question.

Sir Alan Duncan: Have you really? I will leave members of this Committee to pass their own judgment on the President, but he has completely revolutionised the office of the President through the use of Twitter. Whether you like it or not, and whether you think it is enlightened or not, that is undeniable. It has changed the nature of what one might describe as direct democracy.

Chair: I can see why you have your job, Minister.

Chris Bryant: You are being very diplomatic, in a Wottonesque way.

Sir Alan Duncan: Was that all right? It matches your standards, Mr Bryant, I hope.

The President has transformed the workings of the office through the use of Twitter. Whether anyone else will ever be able to do it is another matter; it may be just a one-off, but it is difficult to wake up of a morning without seeing something on your phone that you were not quite expecting.

Chair: I think we will move on.

Chris Bryant: Not for the first time.

Q88 **Chair:** That was very impressive, if I may say, but I think we will move on.

Can I ask about an area of skills that is often overlooked and is a matter of great interest to this Committee: institutional memory and record-keeping? It is a matter of huge concern to us that good records are often not kept and particularly in the digital world, where—

Sir Alan Duncan: Do you mean storage, or actually writing in the first place?

Q89 **Chair:** I was particularly referring to storage, but now that you bring up writing in the first place, there are several elements to that. The first is that, as communication goes electronic, good records are often not kept because, instead of there being letters as there once were, there are now texts or WhatsApp messages and therefore they are not stored.

Then one gets into the fact that for quite a lot of digital technology, as the upgrades go through the old records are no longer readable—not easily readable might be a better way of putting it—and therefore effectively unusable. Old records require a lot of effort to go through and require archivists' time and effort, and therefore often boxes are left unsorted.

There is a danger here because as we know very well, very often the country or individual with whom we are interacting has a much better institutional memory of his or her last interaction with the United Kingdom than we do of our last interaction with them. I am sure you have come across this yourself, Minister. Therefore, we blunder in when



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in fact we could be more sensitive to a prior encounter that has caused either good or ill feeling.

Sir Alan Duncan: There are tons of issues in the line of questioning you have just put. First, by and large the electronic data storage and retrieval is pretty good. I have found it very easy to retrieve exchanges that I ask for; they come within minutes. I find the retrieval and storage in that sense quite impressive.

Obviously, a lot of it then goes to be weeded out under the 30-year or 50-year rule and all that kind of stuff, and it has to be reviewed. I think there is an inevitable growing problem of the scale of what is stored. There is quite a good process of weeding out at an early stage what is retained and what is not.

One of my great bugbears at the Foreign Office, which is probably true of all Departments, is the extent to which, once an issue gets going, the Blackberrys—or iPhones now, or computers—whirr, whirr, whirr, and go to so many recipients that you get an absolute spew-out of recipients and replies, and it becomes very bitty. That is much more difficult to retrieve or to record, but I think the basic conclusions of what that exercise might have entailed are pretty well kept and encapsulated. In that sense, institutional memory is quite good.

Of course, diplomatic telegrams are all kept, as are the efficient writing up and recording of phone calls and meetings. That is classically very efficient. And of course, that does not whirr, whirr, whirr: you have got the original which is properly stored.

So I think all of that is quite good. There is another aspect, though, which I think is a problem: whether the institutional memory of wisdom in people through their experience gets lost because staff turnover is too rapid and goes from one part of the world to another.

For instance, looking back at the Middle East or even Russia, can we really know what happened 30 years ago and realise that there is something that is of benefit or something that we need to know now? I am not quite so sure about that any more. I think that is a bit of a problem.

- Q90 **Chair:** Mr Bryant makes the point quite appropriately that when one looks at someone like Sergey Lavrov, who spent the best part of a decade at the United Nations and has been the Foreign Minister of Russia for many, many years, that one individual has a hell of an institutional memory. I admit that in our system how long a Minister stays in post is not always their choice—

Chris Bryant: Sometimes it is good when they go.

Sir Alan Duncan: This is a clear argument for letting a Minister of State stay in his position for a very long time.

- Q91 **Chair:** We do not have views on appointments. There is clearly a problem with rotation. It is difficult, and it is quite clear there is a balance to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

strike. There is a strong argument for longer rotations, but there is also an argument for bringing back people who have expertise.

Did the academy call back for ambassadors and retired officials—even retired Ministers—who have an experience and may be able to add to an experience? In preparation for something like the Western Balkans summit, they may have summoned back former Ministers and former diplomats.

Sir Alan Duncan: Before Jon Benjamin answers that, if I may I will say something about the people I regard as the unsung heroes of the Foreign Office: the analysts. They do have a lot of institutional memory and an amazing skillset. They do not often get enough facetime with Ministers in the way that officials who have responsibility for a particular issue do, but in their knowledge base and their books of wisdom they will have great historical knowledge and understanding that will be very well written up. They are some of the people in the Foreign Office who can write very well—increasingly quite a lot cannot. The analysts are, I think, an underappreciated and perhaps underused resource in the Foreign Office.

Q92 **Chair:** And underpaid?

Sir Alan Duncan: No doubt.

Jon Benjamin: Thank you. I, too, was going to mention the research analysts; there are others, such as legal advisers. And of course around the world there are the local staff, who are two thirds of FCO employees and three quarters of our employees overseas. A lot of them have huge institutional memory. Of course, they are products of the societies within which we are operating and they have so much to teach us.

Specifically, yes, we have sought to involve former heads of mission. For example, former ambassadors to the UN have been involved in giving talks on negotiating skills, which is woven into our courses on that subject. We invite people back to give specific lectures or masterclasses on specific subjects. That can include historical issues which have a great relevance or resonance today.

Q93 **Mike Gapes:** Following on from your reference to the analysts, how are they systematically involved in policy making and decision making?

Sir Alan Duncan: That is a very good question. One does not always see the absolute process from the Minister's desk. You will know this from many levels.

Jon Benjamin: There is one great change I have noticed in over 30 years in the Foreign Office that illustrates that point. The research analysts used to be and sit as a cadre, in a separate part of the building, and some 15 years ago the experts in, say, Latin America or Africa were integrated physically into the department dealing with those areas and advising on policy and became much, much more involved in that. That has had a very noticeable effect in giving policy advice more historical depth.

Q94 **Chair:** Can I jump in very quickly to ask a very specific question?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Minister, you have certain specific responsibilities internationally. In fact, you have an awful lot of countries that you are responsible for. When was the last time you had a direct conversation with a research analyst about a matter of policy relating to a country?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am delighted you ask, because I have said to my private office that, where we have a specific issue—perhaps before a visit I am taking or, for example, before the Western Balkans summit—among the cast of characters coming to brief me I would always like for them to see if the research analyst who knows about it most can join that team and see me directly. They have been very insightful.

Jon Benjamin: I would add that a very core part of our training for outgoing heads of mission is that the researcher or analyst responsible for whichever country they are going to convenes an off-the-record Chatham House rules meeting in the FCO with, say, five or six of the leading academics around the UK in their geographical or thematic area.

Q95 **Chair:** I was going to come on to that. We do have some extremely impressive academics—we have one in the room—who have huge expertise. Calling on our university field for this must be extremely important.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, is the answer. There are one or two people I see perhaps once every six weeks who have regional experience and who come in for their update. Invariably they will have travelled to the region. One in particular on Latin America has been very helpful on Colombia.

I think the only thing that restrains this is pressure on time, and travel, and a full diary. I potentially have 77 of our ambassadors I could see, and 77 of theirs I could see. There are the inevitable trips and the constraints of the whipping at the moment, visiting people and so on and so on. Managing the diary and trying to make the time to step back from the day to day to inject this kind of experience is very difficult.

Chair: I am going to use this opportunity to shamelessly plug the extremely good book that has just come out, called “Lords of the Desert”, which is a follow-on from “A Line in the Sand” by James Barr, which is an excellent—

Sir Alan Duncan: Who I know very well and I think is now working—

Chair: With me. Exactly right—there you go.

Q96 **Mike Gapes:** To get back to the subject, have you considered reserving a number of senior roles in the FCO for people with that background and that skillset?

Sir Alan Duncan: That is again a very good question. That suggestion has not come across my radar. It would very much be within the operational management of the FCO by the Permanent Secretary and directors. Raising the level of influence of the sort of broader intellectual appraisal is, in my view, a very sensible thought.



Q97 Mike Gapes: Can I ask you about how you ensure that diplomats develop the deep expertise of a particular country or region over the course of a career? What is the career anchor? How many are there? How does that work?

Sir Alan Duncan: Jon might want to come in on this. I don't have in my head an image of the wiring diagram of someone's career progress that means we are able to say that they are clearly specialists in a region, a country or a language.

Often, it is a language—if you have learned Arabic, you will want to focus on Arabic-speaking countries. If you speak Russian, former Soviet Union countries now provide opportunities beyond Moscow. We do have a bit too much turnover. It is too rapid. Someone could be in a Gulf embassy and then come back and be a Director or Deputy Director for the Middle East. That offers continuity, even though you are not actually in an embassy. It is very difficult to give a very clear answer to that. I don't know if we think we are becoming less specialised or not.

Jon Benjamin: Mr Gapes, I think something we are aiming at through the Diplomatic Academy is to shift the dial a bit away from a generalist approach to having more expertise. There are other factors, of course. The length of time people are working is increasing.

Earlier, Mr Tugendhat raised the point that tour lengths are going up in some parts of the world. There is an understanding in many areas that the candidates to be the ambassador or deputy ambassador in the future are people who on their first posting perhaps worked in that area, acquired the language and so on. I think we are trying to inject more expertise, which means a little less generalism.

Sir Alan Duncan: Something else that is happening a bit more than perhaps it did before is that a lot of appointments are by open recruitment, so people from other Departments can apply—even to be an ambassador. Likewise, there is quite a lot of career movement between Departments, maybe from the Foreign Office into the Cabinet Office or the MOD. Someone's career path, having joined the Foreign Office, will not necessarily exclusively be within the Foreign Office.

Q98 Mike Gapes: We can talk about Simon Fraser, who became Permanent Secretary. He was not always in the Foreign Office. Mark Sedwill was an ambassador in Afghanistan. In my experience, there has always been that.

Finally, Mr Benjamin referred to the extension of tour lengths. Is there any assessment of what impact that has had? Has it actually led to a reduction in people wishing to do this or has it been welcomed?

Jon Benjamin: I am not sure if my colleague from HR has more detail. It is quite a new development under our current Permanent Secretary, so I am not sure we yet have much evidence of how people have responded to it. The important thing is that now, when jobs are advertised to be filled internally, it is quite clear from the job spec—people know from the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

outset—that they are, in many cases, a year longer than used to be the case. That is part of managing the expectation of what a career structure looks like.

Victoria Smith: By and large, from my experience, it is not negatively received. People are happy to build that expertise and serve a longer tour length. There are, on occasions, specific personal reasons why it is not as convenient, and occasionally there are operational reasons that mean we want to be more agile, but by and large I would say it is well received.

Sir Alan Duncan: Sometimes there is adjustment after the appointment either to a shorter or longer period.

Q99 **Chris Bryant:** I want to ask about political appointees. I know the Permanent Under-Secretary always hates it, but they can get over that. Sometimes it has been very useful to be able to have somebody who has a set of political skills. There is one, I think, now in Paris—we have Llewellyn in Paris—but there are not many. That seems to have fallen into desuetude.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is really the sort of decision, because it is invariably a bit of a one-off, that is more in the gift of the Prime Minister than planned by the Foreign Office. We had Paul Boateng in South Africa, which was a great success.

Chris Bryant: Helen Liddell.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, in Australia.

Mike Gapes: Alastair Goodlad and Valerie Amos.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, so there has been a smattering, although probably not more than a dozen over the last 20 years, I wouldn't have thought. *[Interruption.]* Washington at the moment, of course, is a career appointment, and very successfully so. I think the opportunity is there, but it depends entirely on the wishes of the Prime Minister really. I do not think the Foreign Office has a particular view on this beyond, of course, normally preferring one of its own to go into a diplomatic position.

Q100 **Chris Bryant:** It is just that we are unusual in the world in this regard. In many countries all of their ambassadors, certainly the top rank ones, are political appointees in one shape or another, either because they share the political view of the Government and, therefore, are able to convey it more readily or simply because they know their way around political institutions.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, it opens up the whole issue, which is the focus of this inquiry, of what their skills are, compared with career diplomats. Most of the political appointments have, I think, been a success. Certainly, Ed Llewellyn in Paris is very highly regarded.

Q101 **Chair:** His relationship with the President of France was pre-existing, as they did similar jobs in former lives.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes. It is still an option that is there. Maybe put your bid in now.

Q102 **Chris Bryant:** Well, Madrid—but the point I am making is that it has tended to be left to the caprice of the Prime Minister. Perhaps there would be a better way of doing it, which would be to find proper resources that would fit in certain circumstances. In the vast majority of places, it would not fit with the British system, and you wouldn't want to overload it because you would undermine other feelings in the FCO, but I wonder whether there should be a strategy from the FCO.

Sir Alan Duncan: I look forward to reading your report. Should you wish to make recommendations about this, we will reply in the normal way. It is not, to be honest, an issue that I have heard discussed in the Foreign Office while I have been there.

Chris Bryant: You won't.

Chair: Can we leave it there? Thank you very much indeed for your time and thank you again for bringing Mr Lapsley and for being very helpful on the side issues.