

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: FCO secure communications and handling of classified information, HC 2541

Thursday 18 July 2019

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Ian Murray; Priti Patel; Mr Bob Seely; Royston Smith; Catherine West.

Questions 116-145

Witness

[I](#): Lord Hague of Richmond, former Foreign Secretary (2010-2014).

Examination of witness

Witness: Lord Hague of Richmond.

Q116 **Chair:** Welcome to this morning's sitting. Lord Hague, thank you very much indeed for coming. I know that everyone knows who you are but, for the record, do you mind introducing yourself exceptionally briefly?

Lord Hague: Lord Hague of Richmond, former Foreign Secretary.

Q117 **Chair:** Thank you very much. This inquiry is into the immediate aftermath of the leak that led to the resignation of Her Majesty's ambassador to Washington. We are particularly keen to hear about the importance of secure and candid communications between an ambassador, and the Foreign Office and Foreign Secretary, and about the importance of having the right people and supporting them in post. If you could focus your responses on those areas, that would be extremely helpful.

Lord Hague: Of course.

Q118 **Priti Patel:** Lord Hague, you were Foreign Secretary back in June 2013 at the time of the Snowden leaks, when all those documents from the National Security Agency were published. You made a statement to the House of Commons about our links with the leak, and about the implications for and connections with GCHQ. In your experience, how damaging are leaks to the ability of Government to carry out core functions? How damaging was that leak in particular to UK and US relations?

Lord Hague: The Snowden leak—revelations, allegations, or whatever we want to call that mixture of documents—was very damaging, but it was very damaging to Western security. It was damaging in a quite different way from the leaks that you have been focused on in the last couple of weeks. It did not damage the ability of the British Government and British diplomacy to function and give frank advice to each other in any way—after all, it did not originate within the United Kingdom system—nor would I say that it damaged relations between the United States and the United Kingdom. This was from within the US system.

It was a very awkward matter for the United Kingdom, but there was no point having recriminations over that; we had to face the problems that it raised together. It raised major problems for the national security of western nations, but it did not damage the integrity of our own system of communication and government.

Q119 **Priti Patel:** This is more of a systems and process question. How did the Foreign Office support you in responding to that situation and the dialogues that you were having with counterparts?

Lord Hague: Over the Snowden leak?

Priti Patel: Yes, over Snowden.

Lord Hague: Very well. As you say, it required a statement—one of the trickiest statements I have ever made, I would say—to the House of Commons. It is particularly tricky to refute things that you do not admit are credible allegations in the first place; it is very tricky to comment for hours in the House of Commons on matters of intelligence, rather than to the ISC. They gave me very extensive support, as did GCHQ, and they are well equipped to do that.

Q120 **Priti Patel:** Coming back to the recent leak in Washington around Sir Kim Darroch's communications, how significant do you think that most recent leak has been, applying your previous experience as Foreign Secretary? I guess I am asking you a range question now, in terms of the scale of significance and how you think the reaction and response has been since.

Lord Hague: It is significant. I do not think we had anything on that scale—certainly nothing that caused any row of anything like that dimension—in the time I was Foreign Secretary, or in the time of most modern Foreign Secretaries, so I did not have experience of dealing with something comparable to this recent leak. It is significant, because it has turned out to set a whole series of unfortunate and very damaging precedents—one, that you can in effect politically assassinate one of Her Majesty's ambassadors.

Q121 **Chair:** Could you envision other heads of state, in perhaps less friendly nations, using a similar technique of blanking a British ambassador and seeking to get them removed?

Lord Hague: I can imagine them being rather more emboldened to do so in the future after this. I mentioned that one precedent was that somebody can politically assassinate an ambassador; it also set the precedent that the Head of State of another country, albeit a friendly country, has joined in making an ambassador's position untenable. That is a very bad precedent for our future.

Q122 **Chair:** Can you imagine another Head of State replicating it, perhaps in Moscow?

Lord Hague: You could imagine a whole range of situations in which that could arise where ambassadors, for good reasons, have differences with the Head of State of the host country. We sometimes have, for instance, ambassadors who are supporting the work of the International Criminal Court, but the Government of that country are most uncomfortable about its proceedings, as well as countries that have a more adversarial military posture to the United Kingdom. Yes, I can imagine that on a greater scale in the future.

Q123 **Chair:** Will it mean that the UK Government will now have to be more robust in defending our envoys—both civilian and, of course, military—to avoid this becoming a norm?

Lord Hague: We should be robust; we should be in principle, anyway. I cannot think of any organisation, company or country that can benefit



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from hanging out to dry an official who is doing their job, and, what is more, telling the truth in doing their job, as they are meant to do. That cannot be beneficial in the long term to any organisation, and it is wrong in principle to treat them in that way.

It is important, therefore, to be robust. Given that there is to be a new Prime Minister next week, no doubt making their dispositions in the Cabinet, I suggest that this would be a good moment to make it clear from the very top that public servants are expected to give frank, honest, clear and clearly expressed advice and that the Government will always seek to ensure that they are never penalised for doing so if they are put in a difficult situation as a result.

Q124 Priti Patel: Lord Hague, if this had happened on your watch as Foreign Secretary, would you be calling for certain measures or changes across Her Majesty's ambassadorial network or within the Foreign Office, in terms of advice on communications or anything of that nature? Could you envisage a situation in which you would be saying to the permanent secretary in the Department that we fundamentally need to take a review of what has gone on? What type of advice could you imagine yourself asking for?

Lord Hague: I think I would be reluctant to reorganise the entire system over what are very damaging but still a small number of incidents. You do not necessarily know that reorganising the system will solve the problem anyway, given that the main determinant of whether there are leaks from any organisation is the extent of the common culture and common pride of that organisation. We know examples in history of huge numbers of people keeping vast secrets for decades, like Bletchley Park, even beyond the point where it was strictly necessary to do so. Yet all of us who have been involved in politics know of many cases where you can get a very small number of people in a room and still have a lot of leaks, because they do not have a common culture.

That is the main thing; everything else is a second or third line of defence. However, clearly there is now a need for more of that second line of defence. To me, that involves increasing the disincentives to leak. If I were there now, I would be asking what more we can do to ensure that we can catch anybody who leaks—if it is a leak, rather than a hack of some kind. To reiterate the point that I made a moment ago, a disincentive to this kind of behaviour is the knowledge that the Government of the day will robustly stand by whoever is targeted by it.

Q125 Chris Bryant: I just wonder about something in relation to that last point. Donald Trump's initial tweet was what it was, and it was followed up by a second round. When, two days later, Kim Darroch had said that he was going to go, and that that had been accepted by the Government, Donald Trump said, "I wish him well, and people have shown me that he actually said lots of nice things about me as well." Leaving aside the petulant childishness of those reactions from Mr Trump, I just wonder whether we should not have held firmer for longer.



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Lord Hague: I would have thought so, although of course in this case, as I understand it, Sir Kim Darroch chose to resign, for understandable reasons: he could no longer do his job, and the embassy was being affected in how it did its work. But yes, had I been in Government I would have favoured holding out against that pressure, partly because of the terrible precedent that it sets for the future, whatever the short-term cost over the days that followed.

Q126 **Chris Bryant:** I understand that both Jeremy Hunt and Sir Simon McDonald, and maybe the Prime Minister as well, tried to say that they did not want to accept Sir Kim's resignation, but by that moment we had not held strong enough—had we, in truth?

Lord Hague: I don't know—the Committee might know more than I do about the internal workings, and you may have asked more about that over those days last week—but personally I would have preferred everybody to stand united around a clear line of "The ambassador carries on," including the ambassador.

Q127 **Chris Bryant:** Just one other thing: we asked Sir Simon McDonald whether he could remember any other, non-friendly nation that had behaved in a similar way, and he said no. I just wonder whether in a way it was more difficult for us because it was a friendly nation. If you have a very capricious figure at the head of a very friendly nation, everybody else wants to dance to that tune, and in the end you find that the tune has moved on and you are left—my mixed metaphor has gone very wrong now, but you get the drift. I wonder whether it is even more difficult when you have a very capricious President of the United States.

Lord Hague: It is more difficult. We have certainly had difficulties over ambassadors before, but usually in the sense of arguing about the initial agrément for them. I had that difference with Iran in 2010 or 2011, when they did not want to accept our nomination for ambassador and asked for somebody different. We said, "No, this is our nomination. We choose the ambassador. If you don't want our ambassador, we won't want your ambassador any more." You can take a tougher line in those situations. I think we have to be pretty robust even with friendly countries, for the greater good and for the long term.

Q128 **Chair:** You mentioned agrément. Would you agree that, given the highly political nature of some ambassadorial posts and the changing nature of Government in the United Kingdom, some form of pre-appointment meeting with Parliament would be a wise idea to ensure that the representation of the British people is done across the spectrum?

Lord Hague: I don't think I signed away any of the prerogatives of Government when I was in it, and I had better not start doing so now that I have left it—although it is cost-free to do so now.

Chair: Now that you have left, it is the perfect moment to do it.

Lord Hague: That will have to be a question for future Foreign Secretaries and Prime Ministers.



Q129 Royston Smith: I would like to talk about the leak—not the leak itself, but the severity of the leak. There are leaks and there are leaks, and this one was significant in the way it brought down the ambassador. From your experience—it may have changed, of course—are all leaks at the Foreign Office investigated in the same way, and as robustly? The answer is probably no, but what are the differences and how is that prioritised?

Lord Hague: The answer is no. On this particular aspect, I am not sure I am that helpful to the Committee as a witness. We honestly didn't have many leaks; I am struggling to remember serious leaks from the Foreign Office in the time I was Foreign Secretary. There were the Snowden leaks, which were on a different scale but from the United States. I have some experience, certainly on the National Security Council and in the Cabinet, of leaks across Government.

The answer to the question is no. They vary greatly, depending on the impact that is made and the precedent that is set, but not necessarily the subject matter concerned. This was not a leak of secret information, after all. You would normally expect a leak of secret or top-secret information to be treated more seriously than sensitive information. But, given what I was referring to earlier—the terrible precedent set in several respects and the need to avoid it being easy in future for this behaviour to be repeated—it is quite appropriate to treat this very seriously.

Q130 Royston Smith: I don't really know what the reporting chain is for the Foreign Secretary. I was talking to some witnesses we had last week about how someone might get this information out and into the public domain. My question, which was perhaps naive, was about the fact that when someone sees something on a screen, they only have to take a picture of it. But apparently some of these things are so sensitive that you wouldn't be allowed into a room with a telephone, for example, as was explained to me.

There are all sorts of ways of doing this, and I wonder how it comes to you, as Foreign Secretary. When there is a leak of this magnitude—I understand that it was sensitive, not top secret—how does that affect your ability to do your job as Foreign Secretary if you feel that some of this information could be, and is being, compromised?

Lord Hague: How does this type of reporting from an ambassador come to the Foreign Secretary? Was that the question?

Royston Smith: Yes.

Lord Hague: That is very routine and every day. Foreign Secretaries vary in how they do their work, because we all vary in how we like to take in information. Some have more briefing meetings, and some read bigger piles of documents. I was very much in the latter camp. I liked to spend my evenings as Foreign Secretary going through as many intelligence reports as possible, because I had an appetite for that, and all the diptels from the embassies—or I would at least read the summary paragraphs of all of them and then decide what more to read.



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That comes to you in your red box if you do it at night, or it is brought to your desk during the day. Certainly, in my time, which is only a few years ago, it was printed out, so it was is an actual physical pile of diptels. That of course means that anybody in your private office has to be reading those things and preparing them for you, and maybe commenting on them ahead of you reading them. That is the form in which it comes to the Foreign Secretary. It can be brought to you anywhere in the country, or, depending on its classification, anywhere in the world as you travel around the world.

Sorry, what was the second part of the question?

Royston Smith: If you felt that information was likely to be or was potentially compromised, how would it affect your ability to do your job?

Lord Hague: It would affect the information. If the people writing these reports from around the world thought that it could easily be compromised, it would change their behaviour and then it would reduce the value to the reader. If you are going to read that many reports from embassies and consulates around the world in a day, you really want crisp, clear, well-expressed, frank advice. A lot of it is about situations more dire than a dysfunctional White House. There could be a civil war in country X: "We are close to revolution here. These Ministers are corrupt." You do not want these things to be hinted at; you want them to be clearly expressed.

Of course, many of those things, if they were published, would be pretty enraging to the host Government. If you are going through hundreds of documents every day, there isn't time to say, "I wonder what they meant by that." On the information, you really need to know that the ambassador in that country is giving it to you straight. It would be very serious if the Foreign Office officials drafting diptels, and the ambassadors writing or amending them, worried about that and changed their behaviour because they thought they might regularly appear in the newspapers.

Q131 **Ian Murray:** Can I rewind, Lord Hague, to an answer you gave before in relation to Sir Kim Darroch? I think you said that everyone should robustly stand behind whoever is targeted in these leak situations. Do you think that the fact that the former Foreign Secretary and favourite to be Prime Minister did not stand robustly behind Sir Kim Darroch affected the situation? Has the resignation itself set a dangerous precedent if people think that leaking from the Foreign Office can get rid of someone they do not particularly like?

Lord Hague: I certainly think it has set a dangerous precedent. Of course, there was also the resignation of Sir Ivan Rogers; I know you had him giving evidence to the Committee. It certainly sets a dangerous precedent. I think it was most unfortunate that not all former Foreign Secretaries could give robust and unequivocal support, but there is an opportunity to put that right. As I say, there will be, in some form, a new Cabinet next week. Again, I would suggest that that is a good moment to make it clear how the British Government will approach these things, and



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to inform the civil service how the British Government will approach these things. It is regrettable if there is any equivocation about this.

Q132 **Chair:** Will you be waiting for a phone call offering you your old job back?

Lord Hague: I will not be, and if I received it I know what my reply would be. That goes for any job in Government.

Q133 **Mr Seely:** On the disincentives, Lord Hague, are there any specific disincentives that you were thinking about? Are we talking about criminal prosecution? You talked about standing by the ambassador. Are you implying greater cyber-protection? Is there more that can be done for the organisational culture? What sort of disincentives would encourage less leaking?

Lord Hague: I think the biggest disincentive is a high likelihood of being found out, almost irrespective of the penalties, as long as there are some serious penalties. I do not think that we should be fiddling about with, "Now you could have an extra six months in jail," or "Now you could lose not only your current job but a future one." Exposure, and the disgrace and the career consequences of that, would be a big penalty if people thought that was likely to happen.

I am several years out of Government, as the Committee understands. There is, as I understand it, a new Government information-sharing system that came in over the last year. I am not familiar with how that operates. In the private sector—in major financial institutions, for instance—if somebody sent sensitive data in an email to an external email address, you would almost certainly be able to find out who did it. If somebody examined an entire database, you would almost certainly be able to work out who did that—you would expect to be able to do that.

That is not a 100% defence, because photographs can be taken with phones and things can be printed out and put into envelopes, but it ought nevertheless to be possible to really narrow down who could be responsible. I think you have had Simon McDonald, the head of Foreign Office security, here. I do not know if they are able to do that, or if they will do that in the course of this inquiry, but if I were still in Government, I would want to know, "Do we have the functionality to do that? If not, why not, and when are we going to get it?"

Q134 **Mr Seely:** On that point, you have two groups here. You have people within the Foreign Office and Government who have a very strong organisational culture and a reasonable likelihood of being caught, because they would probably be on Government systems. You then have Spads and political appointees who may have taken documents with them once they left their roles. Those people might still be encouraged to leak for other reasons, and the disincentives may not work as well for that group. Is that a fair comment?

Lord Hague: That is an interesting thought, although special advisers and political appointees working with any such material should be doing so only on Government systems and not putting it into any parallel system.



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Q135 **Mr Seely:** What about physical copies? You mentioned physical copies. They could be taking pictures of physical copies.

Lord Hague: That, I suppose, is true, although in this case, part of this leak was very recent. Again, I must not start conducting this inquiry by proxy, but it did not look like somebody who had left, given how recent some of the information was. Many of the same considerations would apply, I think. If there is any weakness in that connection in the way that special advisers work, certainly it would need putting right. They should be treated in the same way and be using the same systems as the civil servants.

Q136 **Catherine West:** Lord Hague, may I press you on the question of the role of this Committee? There are a lot of ifs in this question, but if the EU relationship changes, and if the relationship with the US becomes extremely important, do you think that there is a role for this Committee to have some sort of oversight of, or conversation or dialogue with, or to meet, say, the top 10 posts in the country? Those people could become very important, and they need to work in a political context. In other countries they do that—the US system, of course, is famous—but there could be a middle ground whereby the public see who the people are who will represent the UK in those important discussions.

Lord Hague: I don't think that is a consequence of this leak and what we are talking about. There may be other, wider arguments for enhancing the role of this Committee or others, but I do not think that that necessarily arises from this leak. It is hard to oppose more discussion and transparency in Parliament, but you can sense from my response that I am reluctant to say that parliamentary Committees should in effect develop a veto over appointments made by the Government. There is a case for that—they have it in the US Senate—but it is a different structure of Government, so I would not instantly agree to that. In any case, it is not my opinion that will matter.

Q137 **Chair:** Would you not agree that some diplomatic posts, like some civil service posts, are so senior, have such political reach—I would argue that the ambassadors in Washington, Paris, Moscow and perhaps the UN are like this—and are of such a political nature that they are not merely high-ranking officials, but envoys of this House and your House?

Lord Hague: They are Her Majesty's ambassadors. That implies that they are there to represent Her Majesty and Her Majesty's Government, and in effect by royal prerogative. Once you try to define which ones are important, you run into some interesting issues. When I used to read through that pile of diptels every day, I would always read one from Washington or Paris in full, but I would also read one from Mogadishu or Kabul in full. There are places in the world where British ambassadors are in considerable danger day by day. It is not all grand embassies in plush surroundings. There is a different side to the diplomatic service.

Chair: I am aware.



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Lord Hague: You are aware of that. They are very important postings. It is quite hard to make the argument that that group are really important, but the others are not.

Q138 **Chair:** Could I argue this slightly differently? There are some embassies—because Washington is in the news, it has attracted this question in particular—where the appointment of the ambassador has begun to be politicised. People are talking about effectively re-forming the Test Act of the 17th century and adding a question of faith into the appointment of an ambassador. Would not approval from a parliamentary Committee depoliticise and add a level of protection to the envoy, who would then be sent not only by Her Majesty's Government, but with the endorsement or at least the approval of a parliamentary body?

Lord Hague: It might, but it might politicise the process as well, particularly when appointed by a minority Government. The pattern in this country is to have more and more hung Parliaments and minority Governments. Then you get a Committee of a different composition from the Government. You can see where that might lead. I am neutral on this question, by the way, but since you were giving some arguments, I am naturally playing devil's advocate.

Chair: Of course, there are other ways of doing it where you don't need approval, but you at least meet the three, four or five—whatever it is—candidates. Let us say you haven't chosen, and the choice is still for Her Majesty's Government, but the Committee has at least had an input into the candidate process.

Royston Smith: We have moved on from talking about leaks.

Chair: We have; I am sorry.

Q139 **Priti Patel:** You have held the incredible role of Foreign Secretary. You read those diptels every night. You saw the state of the world, and highly classified and sensitive information, in addition to your place in the National Security Council. In the light of your experience and the events surrounding Kim Darroch, in your time as Foreign Secretary, did you ever have concerns about the security of Government communications and the materials that you were receiving?

Lord Hague: The Foreign Secretary and anyone in a similar position in Government is very conscious of the security of communications—they should be—because it is all around them all the time. If you are the Foreign Secretary, you should only use a Government-approved telephone, which is different from normal telephones. On certain occasions, you should use a telephone from your home that has a higher level of security than any normal telephone. You are conscious that different documents you are reading have different classifications. Some are secret, top secret or sensitive.

You have to keep those compartments in your mind, because they affect with whom you can discuss what is in that document. You are also conscious that you are a physical vulnerability in the system, because



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wherever you are sitting with your pile of diptels and intelligence reports, you are sitting with the Crown jewels—with a mass sensitive information—in one place. The fact that the Foreign Secretary has close protection helps a lot with that, but you do not want to leave those red boxes open anywhere, in any hotel or embassy, or even in your own home.

I think you are always conscious of that. The many classifications and the many different compartments and so on always reinforce in your mind that this is quite tricky and sensitive. In my experience, private offices of Ministers are very conscious of that, too, and they reinforce that and treat higher classifications of secrecy in a very careful way. You are conscious of that.

However, as I say, we did not, in that period, in our own system, have any serious, consequential leaks. They were all on the US side at that time, including, in 2010 and 2011, the rather massive WikiLeaks leak of US diplomatic cables, which turned out to be uncomplimentary about the majority of Governments in the world, including our own—or including the predecessor of the one I served in. Everybody just had to get over that, but it was very embarrassing to the United States. I think we were always conscious that the same thing could happen to us—and it could, on a bigger scale than anything we have seen so far.

Q140 Priti Patel: In relation to what happened in the US, with WikiLeaks and the Snowden papers, at that time there was a lot of media noise around that. I am assuming a degree of self-awareness and alertness within the UK Government about the prospect of our systems being hacked, and so subjecting them to cyber-security testing. Were more plans, contingencies or preparedness put in place for those types of external risks and threats that could come to us?

Lord Hague: That is a continuous daily battle. Cyber-security, as the Committee will be aware, does not sit still for a single day. The threats, the malware and the activities of foreign adversaries—states and non-state actors, as we refer to them—change and multiply every day. Part of what GCHQ does is to help the Government, as well as many organisations in the private sector, to defend themselves against that, which means that there is constant attention to it; I do not think a day would ever go by without that.

As I mentioned, in more recent times, there has been a further upgrade and a new system of communications across Government. I do not think there has been any lack of attention to that. Of course, what we are looking at with this leak is not a systemic problem—let us hope it does not become one—but a targeted individual operation, which you can get whatever systems you put in place. However, it shows that the disincentives to commit a breach of trust need to be raised if this is becoming more common.

Q141 Chair: This is something we have seen occur more frequently. In 2016, we saw in *The Sunday Times* a leak of one of Sir Kim's diptels, which made it to the front page. We have recently seen leaks from the National



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Security Council, which is particularly unusual, as you will know from your own experience. We have now seen a series of leaks—in fact, it is a large-scale leak—of embassy documents.

This appears to be a cultural shift. It appears to be a tolerance or acceptance that leaks may just be one of those things that happen. Is this a cultural problem that you think we can stamp on? Is this a cultural problem that is connected to leadership in the organisation? Is this a cultural problem connected to the conflict between the FCO way of doing things and other ways of doing things? Would you care to address any of those?

Lord Hague: I don't think it reflects a weakening culture in the Foreign Office and other Departments regarding how to handle sensitive information, from what I can tell—again, I am several years out of government. There is a very positive side to that culture. Amid all these dangerous precedents and this unfortunate news, it is easy to forget that the great majority of public servants go through their entire career handling without fault a vast amount of sensitive or secret information. That is still the culture of the overwhelming majority of public servants in this country. What goes with that is a culture of wide sharing of information.

I think it is very important to be very reluctant to restrict more tightly the circles to which sensitive information is distributed in Government. The culture of British Government is that dipfels of this sort are shared not only with Foreign Office Ministers but Ministers in other Departments, people on the National Security Council, and therefore their private offices and policy advisers. It is one of the reasons why, by comparison with many other Governments in the world, the British Government, irrespective of party, is—believe it or not—generally more joined up. You are likely to hear a similar analysis and a similar policy position from a British Minister of a different Department. I can tell you that in many other countries, including major friendly countries, you hear quite different things from the Defence Secretary, the Foreign Minister and the Head of State. That all goes with this culture of how you handle but also share sensitive information.

It is very important not to lose that, so I would recommend an enhanced effort to defend the culture we have, rather than say, "That culture is going now." I suspect that the bitterness and poison of the debate about Brexit in this country—I am not, for this purpose, taking sides in that—has increased the range of motives and opportunities to embarrass public officials. We might be seeing the effect of that in what has happened to Sir Ivan Rogers and Sir Kim Darroch. Therefore, it is not necessarily an indication of a deeper cultural change.

Q142 **Chair:** It is just that we are in another moment of revolution. The protection of civil servants from political fallout would seem to be the essential answer to that culture war. Would you agree?

Lord Hague: I think that is an essential component of it, yes. I think there are two essential components. One is to create the greatest possible



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likelihood that a leaker will be caught. Of course, it might be discovered that it was highly unlikely to have been a leak, and it was therefore a hack or a cyber-attack. That is also very important to establish, because that puts a different dimension on it.

Chair: But it is both detection and support.

Lord Hague: Detection and support are the key things in my mind, rather than reinventing another wheel. Regularly over the years, the Government have reviewed classifications. As the Committee knows, there was the end of the “confidential” class, and things moved into “official-sensitive”, and so on. You could change all that around again or change the number of people who see a given document from 100 to 80, 40 or whatever, but those things probably would not solve the problem. Detection and support are the key things to do.

Q143 **Mr Seely:** Can I just add to that, Lord Hague? In Sir Ivan Rogers’ testimony, which was supported by the other two witnesses at the time, including Sir Peter Westmacott, he said that they had already somewhat changed their style of writing. It was self-censorship not for political reasons, but for security reasons. Although, as you were explaining, in your past experience as Foreign Secretary you read these diptels and hoovered up the information that was clearly put, they indicated that they were already having to watch their words much more carefully and, with certain things, almost be prepared to give a verbal briefing while, at the same time, writing something in a slightly more tactful way than they may say verbally. Were you aware of that and did you see that? Has that change happened since you were Foreign Secretary?

Lord Hague: No, I think we have always had quite a bit of that. You had Sir Peter Westmacott as one of your witnesses. I read his evidence, and he explained that he was often in the habit of writing a letter to the Foreign Secretary or to the Prime Minister to go to a smaller number of recipients. That was his habit. He was ambassador to Paris and then to Washington when I was Foreign Secretary. That was a good habit.

That really goes on top of and alongside the diptels—the daily flow of information. You still need that. You still need the assessment of what is going on in a country to be well distributed throughout the Whitehall system, but if you are coming up to a particular European negotiation, you want specific advice in a more narrowly circulated letter from the UK’s representative in Brussels or, if the President of the United States is visiting shortly, you want a letter from the ambassador in Washington that is going only to the top of Government about how specifically to handle and navigate that.

There has always been a role for such special and more narrowly circulated letters. The thing to guard against is that becoming the normal practice—that taking over and the diptels becoming an anodyne array of less interesting information—because that would really devalue the whole system. I do not think that that is a big, recent change. Experienced



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ambassadors in positions that are politically sensitive have, to some extent, always been giving that special, extra bit of advice.

Q144 Ian Murray: I want to expand on what Mr Seely just asked. Given the anodyne nature of some of the communications that you may subsequently get for fear of leaks, is there a danger that overseas personnel could be put at risk, in terms of ambassadors having to send something to a senior Government official and then deciding either that they don't because of a fear of leaks, or they do, it is leaked and it puts their overseas personnel in harm's way?

Lord Hague: Conceivably, yes. I think there is a greater risk that people just do not want to give the full, unvarnished information—that it changes their habits just a little and makes people hold back when they are preparing to send information. That would be quite corrosive over time. You could certainly see more extreme situations developing, but this flow of information—these diptels—do not normally go into details about the sources of information or about individual personnel in the diplomatic service, so there is less of a risk that it puts individuals at physical risk.

Q145 Chair: This is completely unfair, because we have asked you here to talk about one thing, but I will use the opportunity briefly, if I may. There is going to be a new candidate for the International Monetary Fund. It would be a bold Foreign Secretary who was confident that a Brit would succeed. Since that is unlikely to be the case, given our relationship with many of the appointing countries, would you agree that this may be an opportunity for global Britain to be properly global, to reinforce the international institutions that have so often been dominated by Europe and the United States, and perhaps to support an important global democracy such as India in having a place on one of those international bodies?

Lord Hague: I don't think we should exclude that possibility, but without knowing all the candidates—because once you name a specific country you are often implying a specific candidate—I don't think it is wise or helpful for me to go into who should have it. Britain is certainly entitled to take its own global view, let's put it that way.

Chair: Lord Hague, thank you very much for coming at such short notice. We are very grateful.

Lord Hague: Thank you; it was a pleasure.