

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Finding a diplomatic route: European responses to irregular migration, [HC 107](#)

Tuesday 15 October 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 15 October 2019.

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Ian Murray; Andrew Rosindell; Mr Bob Seely; Royston Smith.

Questions 117-188

Witnesses

I: Heather Wheeler, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Matthew Johnson, Head, Mediterranean Migration Unit, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Lewis Neal, Director, Economic Diplomacy, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Heather Wheeler, Matthew Johnson and Lewis Neal.

Q117 Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. May I ask you to introduce yourselves very briefly? Minister, perhaps you would like to start by introducing yourself and your portfolio.

Mrs Wheeler: Heather Wheeler, MP for South Derbyshire and Foreign Office Minister for Asia and the Pacific. Part of the political portfolio is this topic, so thank you, Chairman.

Matthew Johnson: Matthew Johnson, head of the Mediterranean migration unit in the Foreign Office.

Lewis Neal: Lewis Neal, director of economic diplomacy at the FCO. The migration unit is one of my teams.

Q118 Chris Bryant: Welcome, Minister. Some people have referred to Europe as having a refugee crisis. Would you use those words? If so, is it still continuing, or is it over?

Mrs Wheeler: That is a very fair question. The spike that there was in 2015 was a shock for everybody to cope with. You couldn't say that the crisis is over, but it is certainly nowhere near as extreme as it was in 2015.

Q119 Chris Bryant: Sometimes people draw a distinction between push factors that lead to migration and pull factors that lead to migration. In this case, which would you say was predominant?

Mrs Wheeler: I don't think the sorts of moves that we are involved in have led to pull factors. The push factors are well known to everybody: the disruption, the wars, the lack of decent economies, the lack of human rights in certain parts of the world and, frankly, climate change. Those push factors are not getting any better, but we have to make sure the whole-of-route process that we are concentrating on helps to mitigate them so that people are helped in the countries they originally come from and are helped to go back to them by making them a better, safer place to be.

Q120 Chris Bryant: Would you say that DFID is a key part of that?

Mrs Wheeler: Absolutely. In fact, the FCO's role is relatively limited, compared to the DFID work and the Home Office work, but, obviously, my boys will tell you that we do what we do very well.

Q121 Chris Bryant: Leaving Britain outside at the moment—that may be the result, I suppose—will Europe be better prepared for the next crisis moment that may come along?

Mrs Wheeler: Again, if I may, that is a very good question. We have great connections now with the particularly directly affected frontier



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European countries. The work that our teams with DFID and the Home Office are doing is now really embedded with those frontier countries. I think they are better prepared now. There is also an expectation from countries that, if they need to take refugees, it is better to do it in an organised way. We work very closely with the NGOs involved—Médecins Sans Frontières or whoever. I feel that there is now a much more—dare I use the phrase?—joined-up way of dealing with this.

Q122 Chris Bryant: Moving to the UK specifically, with the increase in irregular migration since 2014, what would you describe as the direct effect in the UK, either in individual communities, or financially, culturally, socially or whatever? What has been the direct effect to the UK of that migration pattern?

Mrs Wheeler: I don't want to do something that gets to the point of hubris, but I am really proud of the way communities have taken in refugees by arrangement. My lovely little South Derbyshire has a number of Syrian families, and there hasn't been an iota of trouble. Everyone has been unbelievably welcoming to them. I don't know whether that is just because it is wonderful South Derbyshire. I am sure that, in other parts of the country, there will have been far larger numbers of refugees coming, but by arrangement. That seems to be the thing: if you can do it by fixed arrangement, so councils know what they are taking on—the mental health needs of the kids coming in and of the adults who have been through such dreadful times—those communities really put their arms around people. I think that is one of the best traits of the British nation.

Q123 Chris Bryant: In terms of what is going on in northern Syria at the moment, have you any estimation of whether the Turkish incursion might lead to further migration patterns?

Mrs Wheeler: I have a horrible feeling it is going to lead to more deaths. Whether it leads to more migration, I don't know. We will have to see where Erdoğan goes with this.

Q124 Mr Seely: On that point, has the FCO in the last week or so made any estimates of the impact that the current round of upheavals, caused by President Trump's decision, is going to have? Do you have any potential options or scenarios, with scenario one being that lots of refugees clear out of Turkey and are shoved forcefully into north-east Syria, and scenario two being that Erdoğan pushes some of them to Greece in the way he has done in the past, with Russian encouragement, to destabilise European politics? Have you done any thinking in the FCO on this, and, if so, is there anything you can share with us?

Mrs Wheeler: Lewis, would you like to answer that?

Lewis Neal: I haven't seen anything specifically on that. There are already large numbers of refugees in Turkey. I think there are calls to have dialogue with the Turkish Government as part of that response.

Q125 Mr Seely: Is it something that you should be thinking about? Should you be preparing options and thinking, "Well, this is likely to happen, and this



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could happen,” or is it just a question of reacting to stuff and waiting to see?

Mrs Wheeler: The whole of Europe is looking at it; it is not just a UK matter. I think you were in the Chamber for the urgent question and heard the Secretary of State’s reply about the joint working that is happening with European partners to take the conversation—we don’t want to call it an argument—back to Erdoğan and to look at the areas that are protected already. Those conversations are definitely happening within Europe and within the countries of Europe.

Q126 **Mr Seely:** It is early days, and I am not trying to catch you out here, but, as yet, you haven’t made an assessment of what impact this might have on migration flows in the northern middle east—in Turkey, north-east Syria and elsewhere—towards the European Union.

Mrs Wheeler: I have not seen that.

Q127 **Chair:** Can I just ask something? You are clearly working with European partners on this flow. We were told a number of weeks ago that the British Government would no longer be attending non-essential meetings in the European Union. Can you tell me whether the migration meetings are considered essential?

Mrs Wheeler: Matthew, are we still attending?

Matthew Johnson: The migration discussions tend to take place within the ambit of the JHA Councils, and the most recent JHA Council was not attended by a UK representative.

Q128 **Chair:** Right. So we are not attending the meetings at which the decisions are being taken that will affect whether we see migration patterns to the UK increasing or decreasing.

Matthew Johnson: As I said, we did not attend the JHA Council. However, there is an ongoing—

Q129 **Chair:** So that is correct.

Matthew Johnson: Yes. There is an ongoing dialogue in Brussels between our representation and other colleagues on these matters.

Q130 **Chair:** It is a little bit surprising, given the importance that migration has played in British national life over not just the last five years, but perhaps the last 10 years, that we have chosen not to have a voice in the forum at which migration is discussed. Would you not agree, Minister?

Mrs Wheeler: I think that’s a difficult question to answer, because I don’t think anybody saw an Erdoğan-Trump new arrangement coming down the line. I think that came as a shock to everybody, so I don’t think you should read too much into the fact that we did not attend literally the last meeting.

Q131 **Chair:** Sorry, with respect, Minister, Anthony Lloyd was writing about this in *The Times* about four months ago. Ellie Bucknell was reporting it on



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Sky News. I know *The Washington Post* had some embeds linking up with the Washington bureau, talking about the possibility of a US withdrawal. If the UK Government was surprised, it was the only organisation that was surprised.

Mrs Wheeler: I don't have anything to add.

Q132 **Mr Seely:** I'm sure that the Syrian refugees had a very warm welcome in your patch, Minister, as I think a small number of them did on the Island. One of the reasons why the welcome might have been very friendly is partly—you're right to say this—because it was planned, but it was also a very modest number. One of the criticisms of our policy is that we have taken very few Syrian refugees, compared with other countries, such as Germany, which has taken 1 million or 2 million. We have taken tiny numbers by comparison.

Mrs Wheeler: My boys will tell me whether I am wrong or right, but I think our plan was 20,000, and we have taken nearly 16,000, so they are not small numbers.

Q133 **Mr Seely:** That's very small.

Mrs Wheeler: With respect—no, I am going to leave it at that. We had a plan for 20,000; we have taken nearly 16,000.

Q134 **Mr Seely:** So you think 16,000 is a very large number, compared with Germany's 1 million or 2 million.

Mrs Wheeler: The whole point of this is planned migration, as opposed to irregular migration, and that is what we try to do.

Q135 **Mr Seely:** I agree with that and have accepted that, because it is one of the things I said in my question, but these were also modest amounts, compared with much larger immigration flows in recent history that have suffered from a political backlash. Would you agree with that?

Mrs Wheeler: In Germany, yes. I think that begs a question, doesn't it?

Q136 **Chris Bryant:** Sorry, Minister, were you saying that we were intending to take 20,000, but we have taken only 16,000?

Mrs Wheeler: Over a period, so we have only another 4,000 to take.

Q137 **Chris Bryant:** When will that be completed?

Matthew Johnson: The goal is to have taken 20,000, I think, by 2020. The current schemes of resettlement run until 2020.

Q138 **Chris Bryant:** I never know what "by such and such date" means. Does that mean by the end of 2020, or by the beginning of 2020?

Matthew Johnson: By the end of 2020.

Mrs Wheeler: I would say we are on course to meet our target.

Q139 **Chris Bryant:** Could you provide to the Committee the numbers as they have gone month by month? That will obviously be key to our report.



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Mrs Wheeler: I am happy to do that.

Q140 **Ian Murray:** Minister, may I continue on a similar theme? If we are to leave the European Union, how will that affect our relationship with our European partners regarding irregular migration, in the scenarios of both a deal and of no deal?

Mrs Wheeler: Straightforwardly, the groups we are involved with in the Mediterranean and the English channel are longer term groupings that do not involve just the EU. They are working groups, so that will not change. If we have a cutter in the Mediterranean, that is due to an arrangement with that working group. That will not change, because we have a bigger world responsibility on these matters, which is fine by me. Carrying on our conversations with the French is mainly a Home Office matter, but those conversations are very cordial and will continue.

Q141 **Ian Murray:** Mr Johnson said that the UK has chosen not to participate in Europe-wide discussions on migration. Will that continue?

Mrs Wheeler: What I hoped to explain to you was that it is not an EU competency. These are different groupings. We are involved with a grouping in an area in the north of Libya, and when Malta and Italy shut their ports to incoming boats, there was a grouping around there. That involvement carries on.

Q142 **Ian Murray:** Let me rephrase the question. What will change in terms of irregular migration and co-operation with our European partners when the UK leaves the European Union? Rather than telling me what will not change, what will change?

Mrs Wheeler: What will change? I suppose I could live in hope that irregular migration will stop, but I don't suppose that will happen—do you? What will change is that, when threats and surges come, we will have to use the auspices of the FCO to negotiate well. Our principle is that it is about the whole route. FCO and DFID work in the Sahel, or wherever, will carry on. I am sorry that you only want me to give a negative answer, but I am not going to.

Q143 **Ian Murray:** I don't want a negative answer—I want you to tell me what will change. Obviously, it is Government policy not to participate in the JHA process. Surely, if we are not participating in that process by being in the room, that will change Britain's approach to irregular migration and how it is dealt with.

Mrs Wheeler: The conversation to have is, once we have hit our target of 20,000, what do we do next? That is a conversation for the end of 2020. In the short run, if a surge comes from a different part of Africa or wherever, the FCO and whole-of-route policy will increase in those areas. That will change.

Q144 **Ian Murray:** May I pose a scenario that relates to Mr Seely's question? The Turkish Government have always been very irritated that they have housed 3.6 million refugees from the Syrian conflict. The EU promised a substantial amount of money to assist. That money may or may not have



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arrived with the speed with which it was promised, but they did get some support. They have been hugely irritated by the fact that the European Union has not really given Turkey credit for what it has done in taking in those refugees. If President Erdoğan decides, in the current climate, and given the issues with the Kurds in northern Syria, that those 3.6 million refugees could or should leave Turkey, and they decide to head north, what is your relationship post Brexit with the European Union institutions that would deal with those migration issues?

Mrs Wheeler: Clearly, that is an immediate problem for the countries just north of Turkey. Greece has previously received money to look after people, and the UK's position is that we prefer people to be looked after closer to the areas where they have come from. Our focus is making sure, with DFID money that the economies, governance, water supply, infrastructure—whatever is necessary—in those countries that were the push factors for people to leave are more settled in those countries. Our focus is to make sure that people can go back safely.

Q145 **Ian Murray:** But if that is the policy of the UK Government, in the hypothetical event that there are huge numbers of migrants who head north across the Mediterranean, how will you make that strong case to the European Union if you are not attending the structures of the European Union that are discussing those issues?

Mrs Wheeler: This is all a bit difficult, isn't it? We are leaving on 31 October. Our strength will obviously be continuing with our great friends in Europe, where we need to, but our other great strength is carrying on with the brilliant DFID work that we are doing in the areas where people are coming from in the first place. Our whole-of-route policy is that we want people to go back to a safe place.

Q146 **Ian Murray:** I will not pursue that further, but I think the report can reflect the view that the UK Government's policy is to remove themselves from the very body that is deciding on these big issues of irregular migration across the Mediterranean.

Can I ask you a specific question? What proportion of UK spending in northern France goes on improving conditions for migrants in northern France, as opposed to preventing them from crossing the channel to the UK in the first instance? What is the rationale for this split in resources?

Matthew Johnson: May I clarify? Is that UK spending or French spending?

Q147 **Ian Murray:** UK. If you have the French, too, that would be excellent, but I wouldn't expect you to.

Mrs Wheeler: I am very sorry, but we don't have those figures.

Q148 **Ian Murray:** If you could provide them to the Committee, I would be grateful.

Mrs Wheeler: Okay.

Q149 **Mr Seely:** I don't know if you want me to ask this now, Chairman, but I



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want to ask about the Sahel. If I remember correctly, we have taken evidence on migration, which was looking at EU and DFID-funded projects in relation to the Sahel, to prevent migration. If I remember correctly, the evidence—I think from NGOs and EU folk—was that those projects were not actually delivering, despite the best intentions.

I know this is DFID, but I wondered whether you had an opinion on whether we think, first, that projects to stem migration flows through the Sahel and into Libya are working and, secondly, what your information is about the level of migration flows in that part of the world.

Mrs Wheeler: We have been involved, particularly around Libya, with Operation Sophia. Apart from anything else, Operation Sophia has been training up the Libyan coastguard and navy. As far as we are concerned, that has been a good use of public money.

I am sorry if you have received other evidence that suggests that the DFID-paid-for contributions and schemes in that area have not been as good as they should have been. I personally haven't seen that evidence, and I apologise for that, but, as you say, it is a DFID thing. However, I would like to have a look at that myself and to talk to my DFID colleague about that, because I find it disappointing.

Q150 **Mr Seely:** It may just be an opinion, but it sounded quite coherent in the evidence. It may also be that, however much money you spend on these projects, because you are dealing with an overwhelming human flow, which is being driven by economics, crime and many other factors, it is simply something that overwhelms people in that part of the world.

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, that is completely fair. The approach has been to look at the criminality there, but also the human rights side of some of the centres where people are kept. We have had FCO and DFID people going into those centres. We have had regular flow of information on that. Where some areas are more difficult for us to go into, we have been granting money to NGOs, and NGOs are in effect going in and doing that for us. I haven't personally received information that it has not been going very well, but thank you for that.

Q151 **Mr Seely:** When it comes to the Sahel, what is the FCO's priority? Is it to support European allies, who face the brunt of the migration problems? Is it a security issue? Is it a stability issue? Is it a north Africa development issue? What is the priority for you?

Mrs Wheeler: That is a very good question. I would say it is a little bit of all three. We want to work closely with what I call the frontier countries—Italy and France—and Spain as well. Interestingly, there is more of a tension with migrants coming through between Italy and France than there seems to be between France and Spain. Our focus, other than making sure that our Home Office has a very good relationship with northern France and in terms of coming to us, is the business about trying to bring economic stability back to those areas around the Sahel. I think that is a laudable aim.



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Q152 Royston Smith: Mr Seely made reference to migrants coming up through Africa into Libya. Of course, beyond that the route is by sea. In the first half of 2019, the death rate of migrants coming from Libya to Europe doubled. We have been told that that in no small part is due to a lack of search and rescue capacity. What is the Government doing to address that?

Mrs Wheeler: You are right: the fatality rate is one for every six successful arrivals in Europe, and that is high. In fact, the UK does recognise the importance of the search and rescue arrangements for saving lives of migrants at sea. I mentioned Operation Sophia, which ran until July 2018 and saved over 13,000 lives. There is another Frontex operation around the Aegean, where over 20,000 lives have been saved. We continue to put a high priority on that.

We go back to what I mentioned a little before—training the Libyan naval resources and the border people, because stopping them going and stopping the criminals in effect pushing these migration routes in the first place has to be one of the best ways of stopping this.

Q153 Royston Smith: What is the UK's search and rescue capacity? What is this country doing to try to ensure that there are fewer deaths?

Matthew Johnson: Border Force has a cutter deployed in the Aegean as part of the Frontex Operation Poseidon—

Q154 Chair: Frontex—that is an EU operation.

Matthew Johnson: Yes. At the moment, the UK does not have any assets deployed to Operation Sophia in the central route. However, we have three officers in the operational HQ in Rome.

Q155 Royston Smith: So no UK assets.

Matthew Johnson: Correct—apart from those staff officers.

Q156 Royston Smith: Minister, you referred to Italy and France and tensions. There is a change of Government in Italy now, so perhaps they will see things differently from their predecessor. Has the UK had any discussions on this topic with the new Government in Italy?

Mrs Wheeler: We certainly do feel that there are now more opportunities for better dialogue and a better, planned way of dealing with migration. Certainly, when the port shut, that was a huge concern, and we had to talk very softly and purposefully to the NGOs involved to make sure that they were very careful about what they did. Just picking people up might have been the humanitarian thing to do, but if they couldn't offload them anywhere sensible, that caused more trouble than perhaps it might have done. Having the cutter out there is good and we are hopeful that the new Government will have a better, open dialogue on this matter.

Q157 Royston Smith: We all hope that, Minister, but have you had any dialogue with them?



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Matthew Johnson: The second permanent secretary from the Home Office was in Rome 10 days ago as part of a visit that covered a range of Home Office issues, including migration. She participated alongside the Minister for Europe and the Americas from the Foreign Office and Dame Sara Thornton, the independent anti-slavery commissioner, in a series of panels at the Pontignano conference. That was the most recent example, but it is an ongoing dialogue.

Q158 **Andrew Rosindell:** Minister, what effect do you think recent clashes in Libya will have on potential migration into Europe and our having to deal with it in the United Kingdom?

Mrs Wheeler: Certainly, the latest series of clashes are not helpful, because there were well-run centres for inward migration and the proper processes of paperwork either going on to settled migration in other parts of the world or helping them to return. We have had a really good track record helping people in those centres go back to the countries they came from, with things such as start-up loans to small businesses and things like that—really innovative things to help people go back to their countries, if they felt safe enough to go back obviously.

This has not been good—there has been a fire in one of the centres, which has been very distressing. We have people who are helping to try to calm things down, but I am realistic; I do not run that country, and we just have to see what happens next.

Q159 **Andrew Rosindell:** What is the process for ongoing dialogue with the Libyan authorities to deal with potential threats that this could pose to our country? Clearly, the priority of our Government is to see where the knock-on effects could lead. On a day-to-day basis, how are you monitoring that?

Mrs Wheeler: Matthew, would you like to take that one?

Matthew Johnson: Thank you, Minister. As I am sure you are aware, our diplomatic representation in Libya was evacuated earlier in the year and operates from Tunisia. Within the last couple of days, our ambassador was able to make a visit to Tripoli and held a number of conversations with key senior members of the Government of National Accord, including on migration. The conversations referred to the detention centres and progress towards closing them, and other measures to try to improve the situation of migrants in Libya. That has a benefit for the UK in terms of the onward journeys that some of those migrants may be encouraged to take. It is part of a broader effort in Libya to try to improve stability and, in the process, the situation of migrants, to discourage onward movement beyond Libya and, as the Minister said, ideally to return them from Libya to their origin countries.

Q160 **Andrew Rosindell:** How strong is our diplomatic mission now in Libya? Is it fully operational or is it working under certain restrictions?

Matthew Johnson: It is based in Tunisia.

Q161 **Andrew Rosindell:** So we don't have anything based in—

Matthew Johnson: No permanent representation.

Q162 **Andrew Rosindell:** So our ambassador just visits Tripoli as and when he is able to do so.

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, and that is a matter of safety. When it is safe, they go back in, have the meetings, and do the visits that are necessary, but we have to look after our staff.

Matthew Johnson: Many of the contacts continue in Tunisia. There is a dialogue that operates from there.

Mrs Wheeler: In effect, they are the group next door. It is being operated from next door.

Q163 **Chris Bryant:** Can I ask something off the back of that? Obviously, there have been elections. Do you have any estimation of whether that will have any effect in Tunisia?

Mrs Wheeler: The FCO people are safe in Tunisia, so they can operate from there. We do not see any changes happening to that. We are comfortable that they are still there and working, and linking in with the NGOs as Matthew said.

Q164 **Chris Bryant:** You do not have any anxieties about the new Government.

Matthew Johnson: At this stage, we are obviously monitoring situations and starting a dialogue with the new Government. On the migration reforms that were under way, we hope that they will continue. We hope to support that in a positive sense, and the new asylum systems and training for the coastguard, for example, in Tunisia as well. We hope to maintain a number of programmes and activities.

Q165 **Chair:** Some of the support has gone into places like Niger, where we are hearing reports that only 10% of the aid has gone to individuals whom we would consider worthy recipients. Do you have any comment on that?

Mrs Wheeler: We have heard that you have been hearing this.

Q166 **Chair:** Is this incorrect?

Mrs Wheeler: No.

Q167 **Chair:** Is it correct?

Mrs Wheeler: It was a surprise to hear that that is the information you have had, so we picked up on that first thing this morning. I am afraid I do not have a genuinely sensible answer for you. We will try to find out some more information on that.

Q168 **Chair:** We all know that there is, sadly, fraud and waste in aid. This is not new. We know that Her Majesty's Government is normally pretty good at monitoring this. It is a hugely important area of DFID's work. Do you have any idea of how much of the—



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Mrs Wheeler: I am afraid I am going to say that this has to be a DFID issue. I do not have the information for you.

Q169 **Chair:** Given that this is an important element of Her Majesty's foreign policy in this area of the world, do you think you could write to us about it?

Mrs Wheeler: I am sure we can do that. Or we will ask our DFID friends to do that.

Chair: Whichever is most appropriate.

Q170 **Mr Seely:** Can we talk about Sudan and what steps the Government has taken to ensure that its migration co-operation with Sudan does not encourage human rights abuses?

Mrs Wheeler: On the transition to civilian rule in Sudan following decades of misrule, there are absolutely huge challenges out there. We welcome the appointment of a civilian-led Government and we completely support the agenda for freedom, peace and justice. The UK Government has engaged with Prime Minister Hamdok's agenda and the newly formed Government, and we want to support those ambitions as best we can. As it happens, migration is one of the dialogues that we have been having out there.

Q171 **Mr Seely:** More generally, how does the Government's Africa strategy address irregular migration? I also have a couple of questions about that strategy.

Mrs Wheeler: The Government strategy, as I have mentioned a couple of times, is this classic phrase of "whole route". So our strategy is to engage with DFID and Home Office issues per country, looking at assistance with governance for new Governments or assistance with training police forces or the clerks behind the judiciary, or it involves the straightforward economic uplift to an area. Those are the areas that DFID is concentrating on as part of the principle of making sure that the push factors that make people want to move and leave those countries is minimised as best as poss.

Q172 **Mr Seely:** But more broadly, I am talking about a whole of Government Africa strategy. You have one. The Government's overseas policy in Africa is arguably more integrated because at least it has tried to form a whole-Government strategy. Why do you have a whole-Government strategy for Africa, which is an attempt at integration, successful or not, but not whole-Government strategies for other parts of the world? I am just curious.

Mrs Wheeler: In the short run, the short answer is because of where the migration is from. At the minute we have not got huge immigration from the Philippines or from Mexico, Chile or wherever. So it is the push factors.

Q173 **Mr Seely:** But I am not just talking about migration. I am talking about an Africa strategy in Government that covers not only migration, but development and a bit of military with the FCO in the lead. We do not



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have an integrated strategy for other parts of the world, and I am just curious that we have an integrated strategy for one part of the world and we do not have that same integration of strategy for other parts of the world, migration and so on.

Mrs Wheeler: I do not know that I would agree with you, to be honest.

Lewis Neal: For a number of regions, there are National Security Council strategies. I know there is one for Pakistan, for example, that does seek to do exactly what you say; that takes a whole-of-HMG approach to those objectives and how they are delivered. I know, equally, for the Minister's patch on south-east Asia, one is being developed and worked up to address exactly that.

Q174 **Mr Seely:** So we are going to get an integrated all-Government strategy for south-east Asia.

Mrs Wheeler: I would like to think so.

Q175 **Mr Seely:** That is good. I am just trying to explore these things. So we have one for Africa—

Mrs Wheeler: Obviously, I was hugely excited to be given the new role. There is a group of ASEAN countries, the 10 countries, and we are trying to get dialogue status with them. That is where we are trying to get to, so the idea of us doing a bit here and a bit there is nonsense. We have to be totally joined up about this.

Q176 **Mr Seely:** Well, you have to be, but the question is whether the Government is enough, and when one talks to officials—I mean, arguably we do it less badly than many other countries, so I am not saying things are black and white, but I do think there is an argument to suggest that integration is not as strong as it could be in some areas. For example, Australia and Canada integrate trade and aid as agencies within their own Foreign Offices. We do not do that, and therefore potentially we have actually been moving away from an integrated approach, because we have set up more and more Government Departments to deal with different parts of dealing with the world.

Mrs Wheeler: That is one take on life, Bob—sorry, Mr Seely.

Mr Seely: Bob is fine.

Mrs Wheeler: I would probably take a different view, but I understand the point you make, and I will take the plaudit that we do it less badly than others.

Q177 **Mr Seely:** Okay, you take a different view, but could you put an argument and give me some examples of where we do integration and, despite having different Departments, actually overcome departmentitis and manage to integrate policy?

Mrs Wheeler: I will give you a great example. I just happened to be talking to our guy who was the trade envoy to Mongolia, and I have just come back from two days in Mongolia. The trade envoy work that he had



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been undertaking out there was absolutely dovetailed with the FCO's view on what we ought to be doing in Mongolia, so it was completely seamless. We had a chat in the corridor; it was absolutely great.

Q178 **Chris Bryant:** This is a bit of a hobby-horse of mine, I am afraid, but you referred to it, so it is your fault.

Mrs Wheeler: It always is, Mr Bryant.

Chris Bryant: It is about climate change and migration patterns. In other parts of the world, clean drinking water, the rising waters invading territory that had previously been inhabited, and so on may lead to much greater levels of migration than even those we have seen thus far. I just wonder how alert the Foreign Office is to that, and how much that informs or does not inform other policies that we make.

Mrs Wheeler: In the nicest sense of the phrase, you and I are at one on this.

Chris Bryant: On the same hobby-horse.

Mrs Wheeler: Yes. As Minister for the Pacific region, the first event I had to go to was the Pacific Islands Forum, and up until this point—44 hours of travelling, so—

Chris Bryant: I have done it. I am entirely on your side.

Chair: It may not translate quite as well, but I understand.

Chris Bryant: If you have been to Port Moresby—

Mrs Wheeler: The consensus from the Pacific Islands Forum, which was based in Tuvalu this time, was—up until now, for islands that are not going to be there in 20 years' time, the principal idea was that the 13,000 people on that island would be moved. They would have to go and live somewhere else, and interestingly their children are saying, "We do not want to move. We want the world to understand what is actually happening with climate change and that our countries are worth saving, so the 1.5% target from Paris, the warming of the seas, the rising of the sea levels—you do something more about it, because our island is worth keeping, please."

It was astonishing. Understandably, it was not rhetoric. The emotion that was shown at the conference was something to behold. It was great. The communiqué that came out of that is about what might happen about coal power stuff in Australia, which is a massive issue, the changes in New Zealand, and also, then, what we do as the Foreign Office, DFID, BEIS and people in International Trade about solar panels and renewable energy.

I went to a little island just off Fiji and, for the first time ever, the 30 cabins on that island have electricity. That is our money that has been put into building the batteries, building the compound, and putting in the solar panels and then the infrastructure to those cabins. The good will to the UK for that was just fantastic. You and I are on the same page.



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Q179 Chris Bryant: I just wonder, though. I had a similar experience meeting a woman called Gladys who was from the Carteret islands, which are off Bougainville, which is off Papua New Guinea. There were more Carteret islands than there are now. The water is seeping into the graves where their ancestors were buried,. There is no clean drinking water and they have to move to land that they do not own, where they have to work for others and where there is alcohol. It is a completely different, changed life. I wonder how much sense of real, passionate urgency that gives the Government.

Mrs Wheeler: It does. Again, can I give you some comfort? With us—I do not want to use the word “winning”—being given the chance to hold COP26, the climate change conference in Glasgow in November and December next year, that gives us a whole year to talk to every single country around the world. I have just come back from South Korea and Japan as well. Their targets for carbon reduction are less than optimal. Encouraging them to move from 27% to 50% or 75% or 100% like us is part of my mission on all the trips that I do.

Lewis Neal: From the official side, the work that we will do in the FCO towards supporting COP26 and all the policy is one of the most important things that we will do over the next 12 to 18 months and beyond. If I think about, in particular, colleagues who are just joining the organisation, this is one of the most energising and important issues for us to address.

Q180 Chair: Under irregular migration, one of the priorities that the FCO has listed, the promotion of human rights and the rule of law seem to be major elements. In 2019, it listed illegal migration alongside efforts to reduce the threat of terrorism and organised crime. What is the reason for that change?

Matthew Johnson: Sorry, Chair, would you mind repeating that?

Q181 Chair: Sure. In 2017, the FCO listed irregular migration under efforts to promote human rights and the rule of law, and now it has listed illegal migration as opposed to irregular. Why the change?

Matthew Johnson: Sorry, Chair, to clarify one further point, that is in which part of the Foreign Office’s literature?

Chair: Apparently it is part of your priorities.

Mrs Wheeler: Okay. I’m sorry. I going to claim the fifth—I don’t know. We will write to you on that.

Chair: We are not Americans yet, and some may be glad of that today.

Mrs Wheeler: What is the English for claim the fifth, then?

Chair: We don’t have it.

Mrs Wheeler: You have my abject apologies; I do not know the answer to that. We will write to you.

Chair: Thomas More gave a defence of the rights of individuals not to



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have to perjure themselves.

Lewis Neal: The priority outcomes are reviewed every year. I will have to check, but I do not think there was any particular intent behind the change.

Chair: Sure—it is in your single departmental plan.

Chris Bryant: It didn't do Thomas More any good.

Chair: No, admittedly he did come a cropper.

Mrs Wheeler: He lost his head, didn't he?

Q182 **Chair:** No, he was hanged, drawn and quartered. Other than that, he was fine. Can I ask about alignment on irregular migration policy? How are you working with the Home Office?

Mrs Wheeler: We work very closely with the Home Office. I am told that arrangements between us and France are extremely cordial—

Q183 **Chair:** Through the Home Office?

Mrs Wheeler: Through the Home Office. There are regular meetings—indeed, it is well known that the Home Secretary was over in France around 29 August. The Home Office consider—I must not speak for them, but they tell me that the relationship is very good, particularly with northern France.

Q184 **Chair:** Given that we are looking a lot at areas in the north of the Middle East—northern Iraq and northern Syria—have you spoken to other Ministers, for example Nadhim Zahawi, who has good and strong personal connections in the area?

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, but he is in BEIS. Do you mean as a private matter?

Chair: On a private basis.

Mrs Wheeler: Funnily enough, I was literally talking to him in the corridor as I came here. I would not want to put any individual MP in a difficult position because of personal arrangements, but that is a good suggestion.

Q185 **Chair:** Excellent. Do the UN global compacts for migration and on refugees provide an effective framework for addressing irregular migration?

Mrs Wheeler: I suppose it is too easy to just say yes. I think the framework is there and that it works. I think we are comfortable with it. We would always want to improve matters, because nothing ever stands still. Notwithstanding the fact that, apparently, if I had read it four months ago in a newspaper I would have known about the new Trump-Turkey arrangement—

Q186 **Chair:** The threat of it. I am not saying anybody knew of it, but it had been long warned about as a possibility.

Mrs Wheeler: Right—things will always pop up somewhere, won't they? I am a great believer in Matthew Johnson and Lewis Neal being on top of it.

Lewis Neal: This is the first global agreement of its kind, and as you have highlighted, this is a global set of issues. The UK Government supported the compact, and set out a number of potential actions that countries can take and address.

Q187 **Chair:** I raise it because as you will know, 152 countries voted to accept the compact, but some of those that voted against are close partners of ours, such as Hungary, Poland, the United States, the Czech Republic and Israel. Some of the abstainers are countries with which, I would have thought, the UK would have close and possibly influential relationships, including Algeria, Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, Chile, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Lichtenstein, Romania, Singapore and Switzerland. What are we doing to encourage them to support this important decision?

Mrs Wheeler: I recently had the pleasure of meeting one of the Foreign Office Ministers from Singapore, and I was struck by how open he was to worthwhile dialogue between our two countries. I think they would almost like to think of themselves as a competitor to the City of London—naturally I disabused him of that notion. Even so, we have a cordial relationship. It is interesting when you pick out those countries that have either abstained or voted against it—we have our work cut out.

Matthew Johnson: Our approach is twofold. First, as you would imagine, we do not allow oppositional abstention on the global compact to prevent us from having a constructive dialogue with those countries. With Australia and the US, for example, there is a five nations migration dialogue that the Home Office leads. Importantly, as we try to maintain momentum behind the implementation of the global compact for migration, we must work with International Organisation for Migration through Geneva so that the implementation of the compact does not exclude those member states who, at this point, have chosen to step away from a public or any other endorsement of it, and so that they are able to participate in the processes and contribute in due course if they wish.

Mrs Wheeler: Good question, though.

Q188 **Chair:** May I just ask one final question? The range of jobs that you cover is exceptionally broad. How are you finding it?

Mrs Wheeler: The straightforward answer is that I am loving it. The second straightforward answer is that I am really impressed with 25-hour days. The final answer is that every week they come and say, "You do realise, Minister, that this is also in your portfolio, don't you?" There is never a dull moment, and now that recess is over travel will be severely limited to between Derbyshire and Westminster, which will be a pleasure.

Chair: Are there any last points? Minister, thank you for coming. I believe we will see you next week on a different inquiry into autocracies.



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Mrs Wheeler: Yes, the fun continues, Chairman. Thank you for treating me so gently and for looking after my two gentlemen. I do appreciate it.

Chair: Thank you very much.