

Cross Party Group on the USA
Tuesday 25 November 2025
6:00 – 7:30 pm
Cultural Diplomacy

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Daniel Johnson
Douglas Ross
Michelle Thomson

Invited Guests

Kathryn Porter
Patrick Hogan
Fran Hegyi
Jason Barrett

Non-MSP Group Members

Allan Hogarth
Kenneth Good
Mateo Urquijo
Nora Rothrock
Olivia McLaren
Rachel Moreland

Apologies

Alan Johnston
Dong-Thu Caohuu
Grace McGill
Graham Cameron
Jacqui Watt
James Coggs
Kenneth Shand
Patrick Colquhoun
Peter Hourston
Richard Muir
Rob Lang
Scott Johnstone
Scott McQuarrie

Stuart Patrick

1. Welcome and Introductions

Daniel Johnson MSP (DJ MSP) welcomes everyone to the meeting. The group members approve the minutes of the meeting from Thursday 19 June 2025.

2. Update from the US Consulate in Edinburgh, Consul General Kathryn Porter

Kathryn Porter (KP) updates the group on several state visits during the summer and autumn, such as President Donald Trump's visit to Ayrshire and Aberdeenshire in July; Vice President Vance's visit to Ayrshire in August; and President Trump's state visit to London, where it was announced that £150 billion worth of US investment had been secured after President Trump and Prime Minister Keir Starmer signed a Technology Prosperity Deal, which would include AI centres.

KP mentions a visit from US to the UK Ambassador Warren Stephens, who visited Scotland in October and met with Aberdeen oil and gas firms and met with First Minister John Swinney and Secretary for Scotland Douglas Alexander MP.

KP also congratulates the Scotland on qualifying for the 2026 World Cup that will take place across North America.

The Consulate will mark the US's 250th "birthday" next year with a series of regular events in 2026. The campaign is called "America 250".

Before moving on to the next topic, DJ MSP asks Douglas Ross MSP (DR MSP) to chair rest of meeting as he feels ill.

3. Fran Hegyi (Edinburgh International Festival) and Jason Barrett (Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo) on Cultural Diplomacy between Scotland and the US

DR MSP introduces Fran Hegyi (FH), chief executive of the Edinburgh International Festival, and Jason Barrett (JB), chief executive of the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, to give their thoughts.

FH opens her remarks with historical background on the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF). She explains that EIF has had a decades-long relationship with the US, and US visitors make up 1/3 of all bookers and are the second-largest market online and on social media. The US also has a large donor base that contributes to EIF. With the US's 250th anniversary next year, FH says 2026 will have the highest number of American artists and performers. She mentions she is a part of the UK Government Soft Power Council.

JB opens his remarks with historical background on the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo (Tattoo). The performers are made up of volunteers. Around 230,000 people attend performances every year, and 45% of the audience is international. About half of that international audience is from the US. The Tattoo performed in the US on behalf of the Scotland Office earlier this year and did a three-week tour of the US.

4. Q&A and Open Discussion

DR MSP opens the Q&A and discussion.

Q1: DR MSP asks if there is any competition between EIF and the Tattoo for ticket bookings.

A1: JB: Both FH and JB say no, with JB noting that coinciding events promote more collaboration. FH points out that people don't just schedule one thing, especially when they're traveling to attend.

Q2: DR MSP asks if accommodation prices affected turnout for both performers and visitors. A2: Both FH and JB say it is a significant factor. FH says accommodation is very expensive for artists. FH mentions a news story about the Edinburgh TV Festival looking to possibly leave Edinburgh and look for new host cities. EIF pays for performer accommodation and costs have doubled in recent years. JB says accommodation is a top three issue for the Tattoo and suggested a waiver of the tourism levy for Festival performers.

C(Comment)1: Kenneth Good (KG) mentions that through his line of work, tourists have told him that they've cut their trips in Edinburgh short because it was too busy, especially last year.

R(Response)1: FH says the model for the Festivals was organic and there probably needs to be more strategy on how to manage and streamline information and booking processes now that the Festivals have expanded.

C2: Nora Rothrock (NR) says there is a need for more accommodation throughout city and plans to build.

R2: JB says one of the Tattoo housing options, Redford Barracks, sunsets in 2029 and they are exploring possible options going forward. FH points out that temporary accommodation was set up quickly for the 2014 Commonwealth Games and since the Festivals happen every year, wonders if there could be a similar model.

C3: KP and KG mention the idea of using cruise ships as temporary accommodation. KP states that 930,000 Americans visited Scotland in 2024 (up 21% from 2023 and 40% in 2022). The growth has been organic and difficult to predict and accommodate. She also asks the speakers about their respective outreach strategies for targeting US market.

R3: JB says it's a struggle to explain to Americans what the Tattoo is and thinks performing in the US to capture an audience could help with that, along with attracting commercial partners to promote the Tattoo. FH says festival goers and the Tattoo have a common audience and overlap, so there's no mass marketing.

Q3: AH asks how the Festivals can use business connections for promotion.

A3: FH says she and her colleagues make sure arts and culture are included in cultural trade discussions, especially since the Festivals and arts are a significant employer and importer/exporter of talent and income.

Q4: Olivia McLaren (OM) asks if patronage is more important than ticket sales.

A4: JB says patronage isn't applicable to the Tattoo since they rely on corporate partners. But FH says patronage is very important to get donors, especially American donors.

Q5: Patrick Hogan (PH) asks how to sell cultural diplomacy to stakeholders and quantify its impact.

A5: FH says not to name it as cultural diplomacy. It's most important to give people high-quality experiences, and people are more willing to donate for quality on stage and commitment to affordability for the next generation of performers and audiences. JB says to promote high-ranking military officials and NATO heads. He gives examples of other countries using the Tattoo as a model to promote their own traditional arts and has given guidance when approached by other countries. FH mentions that overseas governments are more strategic in engagement and gave China as an example.

Q6: PH asks a follow-up question about which other countries that are good at being seen globally.

A6: Both JB and FH say Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, Southeast Asia, and France.

Q7: Rachel Moreland (RM) asks how politics affect soft powers and cultural diplomacy.

A7: FH says the Festivals were born out of WWII resilience and it's very important when there is difference and global conflict to forge cultural links. She says oftentimes artists may not agree with their governments, so it's even more important to reach common ground through the arts.

Q8: Michelle Thomson MSP asks about arts and internationalism, related to political differences.

A8: FH says the arts can transcend differences, and JB says it is about finding more similarities than differences among people.

Q9: DR MSP asks FH what the UKG soft power council is.

A9: FH explains that it was set up under David Lammy when he was Foreign Minister. It is made up of 25 people in sectors such as higher education, rule of law, and arts and culture on how to supercharge soft power through tourism, business, study, and UK promotional events both at home and abroad.

Q10: DR MSP asks if it's possible to expand the Tattoo and Festivals to other parts of Scotland and attract locals and tourists to different regions.

A10: JB says the Tattoo is trying to do more outreach by creating Tattoo groups around Scotland for youth. He mentions that the Tattoo does workshops with up-and-coming bands and incorporates Scottish contemporary music. He acknowledges that more could be done for UK audiences (37% of the Tattoo audience is from the Greater UK and 23% are Scottish) and suggested the idea for ticket discounts for Scotland residents. FH says Edinburgh Festivals is specific to Edinburgh, but it could possibly take expertise and its brand to other parts of Scotland and internationally.

5. Close (Douglas Ross MSP)

DR MSP thanks the speakers, attendees, and closes the meeting.