



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 1 February 2024

Session 6



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CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

*Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Pete Wishart MP (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 1 February 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

National Outcomes

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning and welcome to the fourth meeting in 2024 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

We have received apologies from Keith Brown. We are joined at committee, but not for the first time, by Jim Fairlie, so there is no need for a declaration of interests. Welcome, Mr Fairlie.

Our first agenda item is to continue to take evidence on the committee's inquiry on the Scottish Government's national outcomes and indicators relating to international policy.

We are joined by Pete Wishart MP, who is the chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee of the House of Commons. He will speak to his committee's recent "Promoting Scotland Internationally" report. A warm welcome to you, Mr Wishart.

I will open with a question. Last December, the committee took evidence from a selection of the Scottish Government's international offices. The lead official in Washington DC suggested that we should be thinking forward and engaging with culture and the diaspora in the US to talk about what Scotland does now. Within that, we are thinking about biomedical sciences, space technology, renewables and—it is close to the heart of the committee, because it is covered in our remit—the games industry. Your report touches on that topic. Are we making the most of the potential of the diaspora in promoting Scotland internationally?

Pete Wishart MP (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee): First of all, thank you ever so much for the kind invitation to speak to the committee about what we consider to be one of our most important pieces of work in the past few years. Our report is on how Scotland is promoted internationally and looks specifically at the diplomatic network and infrastructure that are provided by the United Kingdom, and at how well the Scottish Government has engaged with the UK Government to make sure that they are utilised to best effect.

It is important that our committees continue to make such relationships and ties, and I look forward to being here a lot more in the future—just as you will be more than welcome to attend any inquiry that we are doing in the House of Commons.

I will now address the convener's question. We went to New York and Washington to discuss the issues with colleagues who were identified and categorised as the Scottish diaspora. We had useful meetings with them about the range of activities that they are engaged in, their views about the arrangements that we currently have in place, how well they are supported, and the types of things that they feel are required in order to be the voices of Scotland in their host countries—in particular, America.

The US—especially because it has tartan week and the events around that—probably has the best-designed and best put together organisations when it comes to the Scottish diaspora. That is mainly because they have the task, in relation to tartan week, of making sure that the events are organised and co-ordinated, and that people are asked to come across to enjoy the events that are taking place.

However, there is a real challenge. We felt their real frustration that their value is not particularly well appreciated and that they are not sufficiently resourced to do some of their work. I know that the Scottish Government has generously given a number of grant supports over the years since tartan week has been in place, but people have, nonetheless, a sense that they seem to be doing it all on their own. All of the people are, of course, volunteers. None of them is in a paid position, so it takes a bit of time and commitment to be part of the collection of groups and organisations relating to the diaspora.

They feel that further information is required in relation to how they might amplify the work that is happening in Scotland and promote our many attributes, and that further resourcing could assist them in that mission. It is a traditional image of Scotland that they present, which I do not think will be any surprise. That is the type of activity that a lot of the Caledonian societies, in particular, engage in. There is sense that they are asking how much they could do to promote some of the more modern images of Scotland.

In our inquiry, we were keen to harvest the usefulness of all the traditional images that Scotland has as a means and a gateway to presenting a more contemporary image of Scotland in the work that we are currently undertaking.

I do not know whether that answers your question, but that was certainly our experience

when we met people there. We are all very grateful for their time and indulgence when we were in Washington and New York.

The Convener: Did you engage with the GlobalScot network when you were in New York?

Pete Wishart: We came across people who are associated with the network. We did not sit around the table or have any real in-depth conversations about its work, but we came across a number of people and leading figures in the GlobalScot network. We found from speaking to them that it seems to be a positive experience, which they feel is helpful.

I know that the Scottish Government has made efforts to ensure that the network is adequately supported around the world. We came into contact with it, rather than taking direct evidence from it in our inquiry.

The Convener: I will open the meeting to questions from the committee.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning, Mr Wishart. It is good to see you.

I will touch on intergovernmental co-operation. It is good to see that there seem to be positive links.

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Angus Robertson, talked about the positive relationship that extends and creates opportunities across the showcase that we are trying to manage. However, of late, there have been tensions around where that intergovernmental process has been going. There have been a number of reports about the Foreign Secretary making comments about where and how things should be managed.

I would like to get a flavour of the real sense of things. Is there a tension building between the two Governments, rather than positive activity? If there is, how will that be resolved to ensure that we capture, promote and work together to get the best?

Pete Wishart: That was a good part of what we looked at in our inquiry. Some of the disputes and fallouts between the Foreign Secretary and the cabinet secretary did, in fact, take place as we were conducting it. Almost concurrently, the Secretary of State for Scotland came to our committee to explain some of his concerns about what he saw as Scottish Government transgressions into what he told us are clearly reserved areas.

The first point to make—which Alexander Stewart captured in some of his questions—is that the working arrangements on the ground are fantastic. There has been no complaint whatsoever by any party about how well officials

are serving both the UK and Scottish Governments. I know that your committee has taken evidence from a number of the British embassies where the Scottish Government is internationally placed and where Scottish Development International works very effectively with Government officials.

We went to Washington, where there is an exemplar of good and positive working arrangements; the Scottish Government has a pretty large mission in the US embassy. We have an ambassador, in Karen Clark, who understands and gets Scotland, who is personally very interested in what is happening here, and who makes a real effort to ensure that everybody is catered for and gets their place within the whole organisation. Washington is also helped because the Department for Business and Trade lead is a Scot who takes a real interest in ensuring that Scottish businesses, particularly, are well advertised across the United States and that support is given.

That was all great—then we had a series of disputes and letters, and a number of deputations to our committee about what was considered to be some sort of dispute. The secretary of state got quite exercised about the whole issue of what he observed as Scottish Government ministers speaking about issues other than devolved areas and responsibilities of the Scottish Government.

The secretary of state came to our committee with a list of what he considered to be transgressions. I will leave it up to this committee to decide whether they merited the response that was given in terms of a directive to UK missions that everything had to be recorded and that an official had to be present in all meetings between Scottish Government ministers and foreign delegations.

For example, we were told that the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, during a meeting with the French Minister of State for Europe, discussed the EU Erasmus scheme and the UK Turing scheme and said that

“there was no alternative other than Scotland to be part of the EU again.”

Most of the comments were about views around Brexit.

Another comment was made at a trade event in Poland. Ivan McKee, who was a minister at that point, said that Brexit was a “mistake”. Mr Robertson, again, described Brexit as a “calamity”. Those are from the list that the secretary of state read out to us as transgressions. We offered no opinion about that in our report, but those were the problems and issues that he was keen to communicate to us.

The cabinet secretary—he has probably told your committee very much the same—fully understands and respects that foreign affairs is an exclusively reserved matter. However, in the explanatory notes to the section in which it is reserved, there is an inclusion that says that the Scottish Government is free and at liberty to make its own arrangements internationally to communicate with international Governments. There is an expectation that such communication will be confined to devolved issues and devolved matters, but I do not know how to control conversation. My first thought would be, “What if you’re asked a direct question?” You could say, for example, that you are not going to answer that question because you do not have permission to do so, and so will not engage with all that.

It is an unfortunate development, and it does not reflect anything that we observed in the working arrangements throughout the diplomatic network of the United Kingdom. As all of you do, we hope that it is resolved. If anything, the ante seems to have been upped with the statement from the Foreign Secretary that support might be withdrawn if there are any more examples of that.

We captured the issue in our inquiry. We referred to the conversations that we had with the Secretary of State. In our annexes, we included correspondence from the cabinet secretary, and we heard from him directly about his experience with all that.

Everybody was keen and working relationships were good, but the air war that is currently being conducted is perhaps not all that useful.

Alexander Stewart: You make some very valid points about the constructive work that is required and is being done, which is appreciated. As a member of this committee, I have certainly seen much of that displayed in what has been taking place. I hope that—as you said—we can get over and manage the situation, because it is a distraction from what we are all trying to achieve, which is to ensure that we create a positive impression and image and that we are collectively and responsibly working together.

For your committee, are there areas that you might want to expand on or areas that are possibilities for the future that would rebuild bridges?

Pete Wishart: That has been a regular feature of our conversations with the Secretary of State. We are fortunate that we have three sessions with him in the parliamentary year, and he has always been keen to bring with him the whole Scotland Office team, including senior civil servants. That features large in the discussions and conversations that we have.

I think that we are all keen to de-emphasise some of the difficult issues. I know that this committee is in a position to look again at the matter and perhaps to suggest a way forward, because the situation does, indeed, get in the way of the very good and positive working arrangements that exist throughout the diplomatic network.

We know the value in that network. We were told in Washington, and we heard from the missions in the eight UK embassies where the Scottish Government is in place, about the significant added value that the network brings to Scotland. There is an opportunity to engage in a meaningful way, which the normal apparatus of UK diplomacy does not do and does not reach, because of the exclusive focus of Scottish Government officials. It also helps the arrangements of Scottish Development International when there is a Scottish Government mission. That brings things together a bit more and ties them in more with the work of the DBT.

There are positive developments. My committee saw just how well all that works, so it would be very unfortunate if anything came along that put it at risk and curtailed the important and good work that has been done.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Good morning. A number of Scottish Government staff have been before the committee, and we have discussed some of the distinct advantages of promoting Scotland with regard to the Scottish brand, produce and talent. That work started under Governments that were in office prior to the SNP and has continued under the SNP. What do you see as being the advantage to the Scottish economy of having a specifically Scottish mission that is ever so slightly distinct from, although such missions are often housed in, UK embassies?

09:45

Pete Wishart: There is no doubt whatsoever that those arrangements, which now exist in eight of our major embassies across the world, bring added value to Scotland. Most people were keen to describe the situation as such. That was the term that people were using for what the Scottish mission brings—they said it brings added value to Scottish business and Scottish trade through the ability to foster and develop links with the diaspora and with people who identify as Scots across all the nations that we looked at. There is no doubt that that happens.

However, it is important to note that it was also stressed to us that the UK embassy network is one of the biggest in the world, with 280 missions across 180 nations, and that staff are always

keen—I should say this straight out—and feel that they are doing the job on behalf of Scotland. Staff who represent the whole United Kingdom were always keen to stress to us that Scotland is a central part of their work and is part of the mix. There is no doubt whatsoever that being part of that network has obvious advantages, because it is so far reaching and is well supported by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, DBT and other UK Government officials who are highly experienced in the field.

The question that must be asked is about the fact that the UK network does not have the exclusive focus that the Scottish missions can bring. Where Scottish missions are in place in UK embassies, that work is being done and is bringing extra value. Other embassies and high commissions are perhaps not able to do that task with the same amount of enthusiasm and energy. We found that, where the work happens, it is very good and brings extra value to Scotland. We are seeing some of the work that has been done, and the cabinet secretary has been keen to explain to this Parliament the value of some of the overseas work. We tend to see that added value comes from having a Scottish Government mission attached to the UK embassy network.

Kate Forbes: We have talked about the value to the economy in trade terms. However, Scotland faces challenging demographic forecasts and it is somewhat frustrating that we do not control visa arrangements. Nevertheless, we have been promoting Scotland as much as possible and inviting people to come to live and work here.

In your work, did you consider what it takes to help people to make that decision—to move from seeing Scotland in a positive way reputationally to seeing Scotland as somewhere that they might want to put down roots?

Pete Wishart: Unfortunately, we did not look at that. A number of aspects of the oral evidence suggested that that is the case; we know that we have fantastic reach and that there is a very high worldwide impression of Scotland.

Certainly, people have references when it comes to thinking about Scotland; we are one of the more highly identified nations in the world. The Anholt-Ipsos nation brands index, which specifies six key characteristics, puts Scotland 15th out of 40 nations—we are not far behind the UK on that—so there is a sense that, to a lot of people, Scotland seems to be an attractive destination and a possible place to live. Maybe more could be done to encourage people to come, given your comments about our specific demographic challenges and the obvious problems with some of our population requirements. That work does not happen in UK embassies.

In a different inquiry that we undertook, we went to Canada to look at the federal arrangements; Ms Forbes will be aware that Quebec has its own immigration arrangements. We spoke to officials who are directly involved in that work, and we saw that there was a whole department dedicated to bringing into Quebec people who are felt to be important or essential to the economy. The officials felt that that facility was very helpful and useful. Of course, no such work exists in the UK diplomatic network.

The Convener: I will bring in Mr Ruskell.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife (Green)): The “Promoting Scotland Internationally” report is really interesting, and I want to pick up on a couple of points.

The Convener: Sorry, but Mr Cameron has a supplementary following Ms Forbes’s question. Can I bring him in and then get back to you, Mr Ruskell?

Mark Ruskell: Yes.

The Convener: Sorry.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands (Con)): I do not mind if Mark Ruskell goes ahead, in fact.

The Convener: Right. On you go, Mr Ruskell.

Mark Ruskell: Thanks.

I want to pick up on a couple of points in the report. There is a recommendation that the UK Government should work with the Scottish Government to create, in effect, a Scottish brand. How easy would that be to do? There is clearly an intersection of interests around the economy, with joint aspirations, but to what extent can we go beyond that? How would you see that evolving?

Pete Wishart: I do not think that we recommend directly that the Governments should work together to create some sort of Scottish brand. In our report we concluded that work needed to be done on how Scotland is promoted and how the brand is assessed and recognised across the world. Joint work by the UK and Scottish Governments might be helpful to develop that a bit further and to ensure that contemporary activities are included when that story is recited and people are told about the brand of Scotland.

We felt, and we were told by numerous witnesses who came to our committee, that we are really good at telling the story of Scotland, and a lot of the activity in the UK diplomatic networks emphasises that, so storytelling is a feature of their delivery in supporting the nations and regions across the UK. There was a sense, however, that we need to do more to promote contemporary activities, including our science, space and biotechnology sectors. We recognise that we are

doing particularly well when it comes to some of the new industries that are emerging. We were asking the UK Government and the Scottish Government to work together to see what more could be done.

One thing that we took away from our inquiry concerned the recognition of Scottish science and the link-ups between Scotland and research institutes and universities, particularly in America. Those are really worth while, and they are seen to be very valuable, so we are now conducting an inquiry into Scottish science, which I can report is going really well, and we are happy and satisfied with the progress that it is making.

The space sector was also recognised as a key feature of Scotland. We are in an ideal position to become not just a European hub for that work but a worldwide hub, and we are concurrently doing an inquiry into Scotland's space sector. We would encourage both Governments to tell more of that type of story.

It is hard to shift international perceptions and brands. Scotland gives a very strong impression, which is reinforced by how our diaspora go about their activities. A lot of work would be required on that, and the committee could provide some really good examples about how that work could be conducted and progressed.

Mark Ruskell: Regarding the international offices and the joint working between missions and embassies, we find that there are different programmes of work between, say, the Copenhagen office and the Irish office, and Washington will be different again. Does there need to be a consistency of approach? You have highlighted that there is perhaps a difference in energy or focus from one office to the next. Does that play out in terms of our interests in those particular countries and regions? Is there something more about the joint working that needs to be codified or brought into a more consistent approach?

Pete Wishart: The approach to Scotland across the whole of the UK embassy network could be categorised as mixed. It seems—we were told this consistently by a number of witnesses—that it centres around the enthusiasm of the leadership in the embassy, which is mainly the ambassador. If the ambassador is a Scot, lots of things happen around Burns night and St Andrew's day, and there is more interest in ensuring that Scottish products are brought to market.

I remember, about 15 years ago, being in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, when a Scottish ambassador was in post. At that point, it was so different from the other embassies that I had visited, because the first thing that the ambassador did for all guests was to get out a bottle of whisky. Such

factors are important to how ambassadors engage with the many visitors who come through an embassy. We were consistently told that it was all about the leadership and their enthusiasm for Scotland.

I will mention a couple of activities that our report recommends should be fast tracked and developed. There is training for senior civil servants so that they are brought up to speed with the range of specific and distinct Scottish issues. Our report suggests that more attention should be devoted to that, so that people have a better impression of the work that they would be doing on Scotland's behalf and the interests that they should have. We are considering that work.

It will come as no surprise to the committee that key Scottish activities in embassies happen for the national celebrations—for example, Burns night, which we have just celebrated, and St Andrew's day. The Foreign Office always puts out a communiqué stating the expectation that those days will be celebrated across the UK embassy network. Again, whether that actually happens depends on the ambassador's enthusiasm and leadership and whether they feel that they could find something that they want to do. Our report says that more could be done for those days. For example, we all look on enviously at what Ireland achieves for St Patrick's day, its worldwide reach and the benefits that it brings to Ireland, its image of itself and how it is presented abroad.

Donald Cameron: Good morning, Mr Wishart—it is very good to see you. Thank you for your report, too. I want to ask you about the report's chapter entitled "Beyond the tartan: Scotland's international brand". There is a well-known argument that is hard to refute, which is that Scotland is about so much more than tartan and shortbread. At the same time, though—and as you will know, as the MP for Perth and North Perthshire—huge amounts of people who visit here love tartan and shortbread, as well as the views. Important though it is to say that Scotland is about so much more than just those factors, how should we strike that balance? How would you strike it?

Pete Wishart: First, I point out that the introduction to that chapter was not mine. It was probably not the most elegant phrasing of the themes that we were trying to capture. All that we were trying to do in it was suggest that there is more to Scotland than the traditional images. However, you are absolutely right, Mr Cameron. I do not think that anyone who came to our committee would, for a minute, suggest that we try to dispel or get rid of all the important features and facets of what we might characterise as traditional Scotland. Those are important, and most nations

would give their right arm to have the international reference points that we have.

The kaleidoscope of cultural images that people are able to conjure up when they think of Scotland is a really powerful calling card. We see that reflected in the events that happen in Scotland's annual calendar, such as the Edinburgh international festival or the tattoo. On the latter, we heard from Colonel Buster Howes about his efforts on all that. All those aspects are really important. They bring people to Scotland who are then interested in finding out more about them. In writing the report, we were keen to impress on readers that those aspects are great and that they work. We asked whether we could explore using those more traditional aspects to encourage visitors to consider the more contemporary activities that Scotland offers. Could we do anything as a stand-alone effort that would draw people towards the new things that Scotland does?

Science is a key factor in that. That was why, as soon as we came back from our trip, we were keen to initiate our science inquiry. Scotland is leading the way in so many sectors just now, and we asked how we could use the traditional images in that regard. In the course of our inquiry, we made an effort to explore how we could reference Scotland's history of creativity and invention, stretching all the way back to the enlightenment and all the way through to the activities that happen today. That is our challenge just now. However, there was never any question that we were seeking to dispel or to play down the traditional images. They are fantastic features that make such a useful contribution to our promoting Scotland internationally.

Donald Cameron: Thank you for that—I did not intend to make that accusation at all. Your report is very clear about that aspect.

10:00

To move on to the linked question of the diaspora, I agree with the report that that currently seems to be an "untapped resource". As you will know, there are so many associations around the world, not just in the traditional areas such as North America, Australia and New Zealand, but in other areas such as the far east. What could the Scottish Government and the UK Government do to turbocharge those links and drive forward that aspect?

Pete Wishart: Is it the diaspora that you are talking about?

Donald Cameron: Yes—the diaspora in particular.

Pete Wishart: Again, we say in the report that it is a much underutilised resource. We reckon that there are 40 million people worldwide who claim some sort of Scottish heritage, and there is huge interest, as you will know through your constituency activities, in things such as heritage trails. People come to Scotland to find out a little bit more about their background and history. Some of the big TV and film dramas also help to drive that type of tourism to Scotland.

I remember the early days of tartan week in the early 2000s, when VisitScotland put up a stall in Grand Central station and there were actual queues of people waiting to sign up to get the information documents to take home and see where their Scottish heritage fitted in. That is an important and attractive feature.

In our inquiry, we only met groups in the United States. They are probably the most advanced groups worldwide because, as I said, they have a distinct task in organising the activities around tartan week, which gives them a purpose beyond that of other groups. We did not take much evidence from groups other than those in the US that we visited. We tend to hear that lot of the other groups are much more ad hoc and are not particularly focused. They look constantly and continually for crumbs of support, including from their UK embassy, which may be forthcoming if there is an interest from the ambassador and the team there. Obviously, they are never turned away—nobody ever is by the UK embassy network—but the interest in that seems to go along with whichever ambassador is in post in the different missions.

There is no direct support at all to the diaspora, other than the small amounts that the Scottish Government gives to tartan week activities. There is nothing available to those groups, so perhaps we could look to build that up in the future. We do not suggest that in the report—we suggest that "better engagement" must be attempted and pursued to get the most out of all this. Those people are the amplifiers for our country—they claim to be Scottish and want to demonstrate and tell everybody about what they consider to be their homeland. There must be ways that we could better support them.

We did not do enough on that to come up with any solutions or recommendations, other than to say that Government should attempt to do that. You are absolutely right, however, that we need to make more of the diaspora. The Scottish Government's GlobalScot network initiative is fantastic, and it says all the right things. There is maybe not much detail on how all that is done, but those are the headline things that should be done. Getting a bit more meat on the bones of all that might help to address some of these issues.

Donald Cameron: My last question is about how we measure the efficacy of our international efforts. The committee has grappled with that issue previously, in particular with regard to Scottish Government funding and work. I think that everyone accepts that it is very hard, because a lot of it is about what is called “soft” power and influence. Did you come to any conclusions about the metrics that should be used, or how we should measure the efficacy?

Pete Wishart: No, we did not. Probably rather unfairly, we charged the UK Government to go away and determine that, without really giving it, in our recommendations and conclusion, much in the way of guidelines.

The report is not recommendation heavy; we are keen to draw together some of the conclusions and make suggestions rather than recommendations. Nevertheless, one of our main asks, as a suggestion/recommendation, is to try to find a way of measuring the impact, because that is important. We will not know exactly the impact and effect that various interventions are having unless we determine a way of measuring that. That is a hard challenge, in particular when we do not know what really exists in the way of resource and support that is available to those groups.

Perhaps we could speak to them a bit more. When we turned up in Washington and New York, I think that people in those groups were all quite surprised to find that there were members of Parliament sitting across from them. Other than fleeting visits from people during tartan week, that does not tend to happen, so they found it quite exotic that they were talking to UK members of Parliament about the Scottish diaspora. Perhaps just listening to those groups a bit more would be useful.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It is nice to see you here, Mr Wishart. I will continue the theme that Mr Cameron raised when he asked you about the chapter of your report that is entitled “Beyond the tartan: Scotland’s international brand”. This is not meant to be a provocative question, despite the fact that it will come across that way. The Anholt-Ipsos nation brands index, which the Scottish Government uses to monitor Scotland’s international reputation, ranks Scotland in 15th place. The UK is ranked sixth. Where is England’s place in that index?

Pete Wishart: I do not think that there is a ranking for England. There is a UK ranking, and Wales and Northern Ireland are ranked separately, and also quite highly, in that index, but England is not part of the classification.

Jim Fairlie: I will go back to Mr Cameron’s question about how we measure our international

efforts. If you are looking at the UK overall as a brand—I find that strange, given that the UK is not actually a country—is it not difficult to extrapolate from where Scotland takes the direct benefit of its own culture and where England does the same?

Furthermore, there are aspects of our culture about which people in this country will say, “I hate that,” and take offence—an example would be the “See you, Jimmy” hats; it is the same for the Irish and the talk about leprechauns. However, in terms of international recognition, those aspects are hugely valuable to us. Does that not make it more difficult for us to get to the real value of what Scotland promotes internationally?

Pete Wishart: I think that the index attempts to look at activity. We have the Scottish Government and there is a form of Government across the other nations of the UK, but there is not an English Government as such, so it tends to be the case that England is assessed in terms of the whole of the United Kingdom. The UK ranks above Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the index, which is probably on the back of tourist travel to London and some of the English cultural figures in the UK, whether that is Shakespeare, Dickens or whoever, who drive traffic.

We also know that the UK gets lots of tourism due to its cultural offering, whether that is concerts or west end shows in, again, London. That would probably be captured in the UK features, because culture is a big part of the index and a lot of weighting is given to that part of the assessment in how countries are ranked.

The UK activity would, I imagine, take account of Scotland, too. I am not sure about that, but I suspect that it takes account of all the work that the UK international infrastructure does, whether through embassies or the UK Department for Business and Trade. I suspect that that is how that activity would be captured. It is, perhaps, frustrating that we cannot assess Scotland against England, which is the major nation in the United Kingdom, and that we therefore do not get the true picture of our place in the index.

Jim Fairlie: I think that it would be equally frustrating for English people, who are not able to talk about and celebrate their own culture and everything they do that is absolutely brilliant.

In your report, you quoted Anthony Salamone, the founder of European Merchants, which is a Scottish political analysis firm, who wrote in his evidence that it is

“still the case that many people around the world recognise Scotland more for its past than its present, and know Scotland’s cultural traditions but not its scientific excellence.”

I reiterate that there is nothing that I like more than putting on a kilt and marching down

somebody else's high street, whether in Berlin or someplace else, because it attracts a huge amount of attention. However, is that not also a failure? We are the country of the enlightenment and of so many scientific and medical innovations that have made such a huge difference across the world, yet we are still recognised only for the traditional cultural things rather than for the scientific and engineering expertise that Scotland has given to the world.

Pete Wishart: I am wrestling with the image of Jim Fairlie walking down the Royal Mile in his kilt, but we will leave that aside.

I think that you had Mr Salamone before your committee, too. He was a very compelling witness, and his expertise is highly regarded. He certainly made a useful contribution to shaping up our inquiry, and we found his input very helpful.

That is something that runs through our report, and, as I said in response to Mr Cameron's questions, we constantly tried to emphasise that aspect as much as we could. We have fantastic traditional images of Scotland, which we are really good at utilising and taking the most advantage of, but we do not tell the contemporary story of Scotland in a way that is particularly useful.

You hit the nail right on the head. We link the past and tradition with the current and the contemporary through that link to the enlightenment and the part that it has played. I know that the James Hutton Institute is doing a bit of work here: I think that it is 200 years since James Hutton's work on geology. The institute will be doing a lot of work on telling the story about Scotland's scientific journey to where we are now, making use of some of the historical references. That will be a really important piece of work.

We have much more to do, so I was keen for our committee to cover science. A big part of that involves taking a journey from where it all started, which was the Scottish enlightenment and the great culture of invention and creativity, all the way through to where we are now, with our cutting-edge biotech. Some of what we are doing in the quantum field is just amazing. We are world leaders in what we are doing with small satellites: we are a European hub. All those stories have to be told. We are great at telling the old stories: we love it—that includes you with your kilt on going down the High Street, Jim—and that is all really important stuff. Equally important is the modern message about Scotland and what we are doing to attract some further activity around our industries.

Jim Fairlie: I hear what you are saying about our having to do more. One of the witnesses that you had before you, Professor Murray Pittock, spoke about innovation, contemporary strengths

and sectors such as space. As your committee's report notes in that regard,

"more could be done by the UK Government to platform more of Scotland's innovation".

Professor Pittock said that that was "not currently happening optimally". That is his quote, not mine. That is something that we will be considering.

You said in one of your conclusions:

"In its response to this report, the UK Government should agree a definition of the Scottish brand to be advanced by it internationally, followed by annual reporting updates on embassy activity promoting Scotland that has taken place each year."

I presume that that would be in conjunction with the Scottish Government in order to make that as effective as possible. You could possibly respond on that.

St Patrick's day is huge across the world—nothing gets the Irish brand out there more than St Patrick's day, whether in Sydney, Beijing or New York. Should the Scottish Government not be doing more to make St Andrew's day a much bigger festival, even if that involves hooking into the traditional? If we hook into the traditional side, it gets our voice out there far more internationally. If we do not do that at home, why would we expect others in the diaspora to do it?

Pete Wishart: That day is celebrated, but we could make it whatever we want. St Andrew's day is the national day of Scotland. Just like the Irish sometimes have different theme days for their St Patrick's day celebration and events, there is nothing to stop Scotland doing whatever it wants, which could be agreed by both Governments, if there is anything that we particularly wanted to transmit for St Andrew's day. It is up to us to design that, and that would be our job, as leaders; it would be the Governments' job to organise most of the international events. That would be a matter for decision makers concerning the day.

On the brand, you are right, and we asked the Government to work on that—perhaps slightly unfairly, because it is a massive piece of work, and how it would be assessed is pretty much subjective.

10:15

I am just looking at the Government's response to our recommendations. It feels that the most important part of its job is some of the work around St Andrew's day and, increasingly, Burns night, and the value that it can bring on foreign missions and trips, with delegations to different nations. When we asked about the work that they are doing on branding, it highlighted the Japanese seafood show in Tokyo, the VisitBritain workshop in China and the four nations festival of flavours in

France. That is the type of work that the UK Government feels is important and what it can offer when it comes to transmitting and telling the story of the Scottish brand, but I will just leave it hanging as to whether you think that more can be done or whether that is sufficient.

In its response to nearly all of our recommendations—which, I should say, are not hard recommendations; they are more helpful suggestions on how things could be done—the UK Government tends to come back to international visits; its contribution to international trade, which is quite significant; and the hosting of events and the placing of VisitScotland, perhaps, in some of its international exhibitions and stalls.

The Convener: Okay, Mr Fairlie?

Jim Fairlie: I could go on, convener.

The Convener: There might be a little time at the end.

I call Neil Bibby.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, convener, and good morning, Mr Wishart. I commend your committee for its report, in which you talk about the lack of a strategic big picture with regard to the UK Government's work in relation to Scotland. You also talk about the need for co-operation and highlight the shared priorities between the Scottish and UK Governments. To what extent is the UK Government's lack of a strategic big picture with regard to Scotland down to a lack of a strategic big picture from the UK and Scottish Governments in general?

You have talked about the important work that the UK Government is doing on defence and security—indeed, that work is really important at this time—and the Scottish Government's important work on the diaspora. However, it is on the specific issue of economic interests and inward investment that I want to ask you about the extent to which you think that the UK Government's lack of a strategic big picture in its work on Scotland comes from the lack of such a picture from both Governments—notwithstanding, of course, the good work that you have highlighted, and with which I would agree, on defence, security and the diaspora.

Pete Wishart: That is a really good question. The lack of a clear strategic vision is something that we came back to repeatedly, and it goes through some of the suggestions/recommendations that we presented to the UK Government on how that issue could be addressed and how such a vision could be designed.

It is a challenge, though, for not just the UK Government but the Scottish Government, and it is all about how they work together to deliver on that.

We suggested a couple of things that they might want to look at, including horizon scanning for whatever might be coming along in the future that could be utilised to Scotland's advantage in promoting itself.

One of our most important suggestions was an audit of international activity to look at what we are doing, where we are just now and how we are promoting Scotland and an assessment of whether it is working. Why did we go to tartan week, for example? It is perhaps the single-biggest event promoting Scotland anywhere in the world at any point in the calendar year, and it was important for us to go to it and talk to people. We got some feedback on how that sort of thing could be better used, with, for example, the UK Government engaging a little bit more, and indeed, we made that very suggestion to it.

It is all about knowing exactly what we are doing. I gave you a list of three things that the UK Government highlighted to us as part of its work on promoting the Scottish brand, but it would be good to see all that activity written down. It was one of the things that we asked for, but we did not get a commitment from the UK Government to delivering it. As a result, we will probably revisit the issue, because I think that it would probably be the most useful thing that we could get from the UK Government—and, indeed, from the Scottish Government, because I am pretty certain that there would be a request for it to help with listing some of its activities, too. Such an audit would give us a picture of things, and then we would be able to assess whether they were working or delivering in terms of getting that promotional activity for Scotland. That, more than anything else, will be important.

We also need to look at what lies down the road. The 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—was a revelation and a development. In the past, Scotland might not have expected to host a conference, but we were able to do that and did so very well. Are there other things like that coming down the pipeline that we could take advantage of?

Neil Bibby: Thank you for that answer, Mr Wishart. That is helpful.

There are different strands of work. We have international work and inward investment work, we are reaching out to the diaspora, and there is cultural work as well. On inward investment and economic interests, I have heard the desire from businesses for a single point of contact to take forward inward investment plans. That can be challenging when there is not only a UK Government and a Scottish Government but, even within the Scottish Government, different

agencies—there are different agencies at the UK level as well.

We want co-operation, but we also want to avoid duplication and attract as much inward investment as we can. During your inquiry, did you hear similar reflections on the need to streamline approaches and have a single point of contact to attract inward investment? Do you have any further reflections on that?

Pete Wishart: We did not conclude that in the report. We said that a number of things could be done to improve the UK Government's trade reach.

On the different agencies, Scottish Development International came across really well. Everybody appreciated its input, its efforts and the difference that it makes in securing further investment in Scotland and supporting and facilitating Scotland's businesses to reach markets overseas. How it was characterised to us is that all the stuff is happening in the UK network—we were told that £41 billion-worth of Scottish trade comes through the UK—but SDI offers added value. It enables us to get a competitive advantage in relation to other regions of the United Kingdom or other nations. That was seen to be what we secured and gained from having that distinct network working in Scotland.

Do the agencies work closely together? From what we saw, the answer to that is yes. We saw that in our Washington embassy visit. There did not seem to be anybody standing on anybody's toes at all. The Scotland Office team gave a couple of examples of nations in which SDI is perhaps not so prominent and there is no Scottish Government mission. I think that Lord Offord talked about Chile and Peru in South America. There is an extra emphasis on the UK Government doing that work for Scotland, but the Government said that nobody else was doing that, so it picked that up. Without the specific input from SDI or the Scottish Government, there is perhaps not the same energy in or emphasis on that work.

Mark Ruskell: The focus of the report is on promoting Scotland internationally, so it is all about culture, economic development and the diaspora. Is there a question for your committee, Mr Wishart, about how Scotland projects itself internationally, particularly from a global justice perspective?

Giving birth to the industrial revolution is in our history, and we were part of a colonial project of empire. There are questions about how we relate to the world now. I am thinking about the Scotland-Malawi link as a way to address global justice in a modern age. Beyond the work of embassies, economic development and promotion, which are hugely important, is there anything that needs to be considered in how we project ourselves as an

international player? That brings in soft power, the United Nations climate change conference of the parties and things that you have already mentioned.

Pete Wishart: We did not capture that. Some of those themes came through in the evidence sessions and some of the written evidence that was presented to the committee. An inquiry into the impression of Scotland when it comes to issues beyond promotion and trade strikes me as being distinct and separate and a big piece of work. It would be a fantastic piece of work to undertake, but I do not think that it would be my committee's job to consider that. Although that would interest me, it would be more your job.

We recognise from evidence that we got from the cabinet secretary in particular that Scotland wants to make an impression internationally that is perhaps distinct from that of the rest of the United Kingdom. It wants to capture the values of the Scottish Parliament, some of Scotland's cultural tradition, and our history of involvement in a number of events to which you referred in your question, for example. A big piece of work can be done on that.

Unfortunately, we did not capture much of that at all, but I certainly recognise the Scottish Parliament's efforts to ensure that Scotland is presented in a way that reflects our society, the community that we live in and the values that we hope to express.

Mark Ruskell: It is clear that there can be an intersection. For example, there are trade and business elements at COP, but there are also global justice and international negotiations elements. Some of those are reserved matters, but they impinge on devolved responsibilities.

I noticed that the Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland was at the Arctic Circle Assembly meeting in Reykjavik. Again, that assembly is about trade and business, but it is also about the big challenge of the climate. It seems that there is something there.

Pete Wishart: You are absolutely right; it is all interconnected. Had we done the inquiry five years ago, COP would have been a massive feature of it because of the outreach work that the Scottish Government in particular was able to do and the fact that Scotland hosted that event.

I can say quite candidly to you, Mr Ruskell, that that did not feature much at all. It was not part of the things that we looked at. However, the interconnection that you have suggested is recognised. It is also recognised in the UK Government's work. Those things would have featured in discussions in the list of some of the events that it has attended.

Part of the dispute that Mr Stewart discussed came to a head at the latest COP, with an implied suggestion—I would not say threat—that, if transgressions, according to the UK Government, were continued, the Scottish Government would be asked to vacate the UK Government's offices. I do not think that that was particularly helpful. That would alarm everybody in the Scottish Parliament, and it would certainly alarm those who care and are concerned about Scotland being able to do its job of attracting trade, promoting itself properly internationally, and making connections and links.

I hope that—this is my last plea—we can resolve some of the outstanding tensions, de-emphasise them, and get back to what seems to be working, which is captured in our report. Everything on the ground is working well. Our working arrangements are sound and in a good place, and there seems to be mutual respect across all the different and distinct threads—the Scottish Government, Scottish Development International, the Department of Trade and Industry and the FCDO. I hope that that will continue. We as a committee will continue to put that case and try to ensure that that happens.

Mark Ruskell: My last question is about how the relationship plays out in Ireland. I did not see on the list of concerns from the secretary of state that there had been inappropriate bilaterals or meetings in Ireland. When the committee went to Ireland recently, my sense was that there was a very different set of expectations there, that conversations were far more fluid between politicians in the north and south and across the UK, and that there was less concern about, or stricture put on, the nature of those conversations and who has to be in the room. Is that your conclusion?

Pete Wishart: I think that, a few years, ago, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee did a roughly similar piece of work, on how Northern Ireland reaches the world. The conditions relating to Northern Ireland and the whole island of Ireland are totally distinct, different and separate from the concerns that we have in Scotland. When it comes to how arrangements with Ireland are conducted and observed by the UK, there are always different arrangements, there is always different emphasis, and there is perhaps a little more latitude when it comes to such international conversations there.

I think that the letter that came from the Foreign Secretary came as a surprise to everybody who was involved in all of this. Having spoken to the cabinet secretary, I know that he was quite surprised and shocked when it appeared, and he wrote to try to get issues clarified.

10:30

Every Government and nation should have the right and opportunity to express itself and to represent itself adequately and properly in international fora. Obviously, there are rules, which are designed such that—again, our report stresses this—the matter of foreign affairs is exclusively reserved. Even so, there must be a place and an opportunity for that.

You mentioned the Malawi exercise. That was fantastic. The Malawi partnership that Jack McConnell delivered in the Parliament in the early 2000s was a distinct piece of work—I am desperately trying to remember what he called that. There was a way in which we were able to form those links that was to everybody's benefit. Maybe we should look further at those arrangements. We did not look at them as part of the report, but that was an example of good relationships between the UK Government and the Scottish Government, which allowed us to do some distinct work within the confines of the constitutional arrangements that we find ourselves in.

Mark Ruskell: I think that there was some relationship between Wales and Lesotho at that time as well.

Jim Fairlie: I will be brief. You picked up a point about SDI—that it can sometimes gain regional advantages or added value in its interactions. On the other side of that, when the UK is talking, it has primacy in any discussions that are had. The best example that I have of that is that, when the UK Government was speaking to a Japanese delegation, Richard Lochhead tried hard to get Scotch beef on the menu as an export potential, but he was told, "That's not currently a priority for us." There will be tensions about whose priority is more important. Is that just a cost of doing business and being part of the union?

Pete Wishart: I will keep to myself my personal views on that. However, you are absolutely right about the way in which bilateral talks and working arrangements are done. We also see that in the number of trade deals that the UK Government is currently negotiating with a number of third party nations. The Department for Business and Trade will lead those discussions and conversations. I do not know, but I suspect that the opportunities for enterprise bodies such as Scottish Development International are rather limited, given the nature of how such talks develop.

All that I will say, Mr Fairlie, is that, in another report and inquiry that we conducted, on federal arrangements across Canada, we all looked jealously at the input and involvement of the Canadian provinces when it came to conversations and discussions about trade deals.

They were intrinsically involved, consulted and asked for their views on any development or anything that was being negotiated, and their input was valued when the federal Government made trade deals and arrangements. In that report all those years ago, we noted the influence that they had when it came to shaping the final trade deals that were negotiated by the federal Government. Scotland most definitely does not have anything like that when it comes to the shaping of the trade deals and arrangements that are currently being negotiated.

The Convener: I will ask the final question, which is about perception. It has been mentioned that we are kind of jealous of Ireland and its opportunities. When we visited Dublin, we learned that it was opening its 131st mission. Our work has shown—this view is unanimous, I think, among the committee members who were involved in it—that the Scottish foreign offices and the work that is done by those international offices are of great value and very welcome, and that we want that. However, in the bubble that is the Scottish Parliament, we sometimes hear those offices described as “pretendy” foreign offices and a waste of money. Such rhetoric seems to come forward quite a lot in this bubble. Do you have any reflections on how those offices are perceived by your colleagues in Westminster?

Pete Wishart: I think that they are viewed and received very positively. That is certainly the experience in all the work that has been done with them. Any assessment of their value and what they bring to Scotland has viewed them as being relatively of benefit and value to Scotland. I do not think that colleagues in the House of Commons hold the general political perception that you have described.

The offices can be unfairly characterised in the press. There are constant references to them being stuck away in a broom cupboard, which is far from the reality of the situation. For example, we would all be rather jealous of what is available to the offices of the Scottish Government in Washington and the connections that they have. They are viewed very favourably by ambassadors and other key figures and officials in the embassy network.

I do not know where that came from. It is not a helpful description of what goes on in the important work of the Scottish Government missions. Those who suggest that should maybe go out to Washington to have a look at how that work takes place, the connections that the office has, and the extra value that it brings to Scottish business. If they observed that in practice, they would be very surprised, and we would probably hear the end of such descriptions.

The Convener: We have exhausted the committee's questions.

I will finish on a reflection about my visit to Taiwan a few years ago. I was completely unaware that a contemporary of David Livingstone had visited the island of Formosa. There was a museum in one of the hospitals, because he started medicine on the island.

I also visited Taipei 101. On the top floor, there was an engineering feats of the world exhibition, which included the Falkirk wheel. I had no idea that that was there. As a regional MSP at the time, I was delighted to see that. Sometimes we do not know what opportunities might be out there for us to build on Scotland's place in the world from history and for the future.

Thank you very much for your attendance this morning, Mr Wishart.

Pete Wishart: It was a pleasure. Thank you.

The Convener: I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 10:36.

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