



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

**Proposed appointment
of Rt Hon Jack
McConnell MSP as High
Commissioner to
Malawi**

Sixth Report of Session 2007–08

*Report, together with formal minutes, oral and
written evidence*

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The Foreign Affairs Committee

The Foreign Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its associated agencies.

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Rt Hon Sir John Stanley (*Conservative, Tonbridge and Malling*)
Ms Gisela Stuart (*Labour, Birmingham Edgbaston*)

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The current staff of the Committee are Dr Robin James (Clerk), Ms Gosia McBride (Second Clerk), Mr Imran Shafi (Committee Specialist), Dr Brigid Fowler (Committee Specialist), Miss Elisabeth Partridge (Committee Assistant), Miss Jennifer Kelly (Secretary), Jane Lauder (Secretary), Miss Emma McIntosh (Chief Office Clerk) and Mr Alex Paterson (Media Officer).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerks of the Foreign Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6394; the Committee's email address is foraffcom@parliament.uk

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1 Introduction

1. On 23 April 2008 we took oral evidence from the Rt Hon Jack McConnell MSP, in anticipation of his forthcoming appointment as High Commissioner to Malawi. This marks the first time we have held a “pre-appointment hearing”.
2. In this report we give our conclusions arising from the evidence session, and make some comments about wider procedures relating to the scrutiny of diplomatic appointments. We also print with the report Mr McConnell’s written responses to a short questionnaire which we sent to him in advance of the hearing.¹
3. We are grateful to Mr McConnell for his co-operation in the pre-appointment procedure.

2 Appointment of Mr Jack McConnell

Background to our hearing

4. We have previously announced our intention of scrutinising any major diplomatic or consular appointment of a person from outside the diplomatic service. In our annual report for 2006 we noted that the only such appointments to be made in recent years were made during the period when there was no Committee in existence, at the time of the 2005 general election. As the appointments were *faits accomplis* by the time the Committee was nominated, we did not hold hearings with the individuals concerned.²
5. In August 2007, the Government announced that it intended to appoint Scottish Labour leader and former First Minister Rt Hon Jack McConnell MSP as British High Commissioner to Malawi when the current High Commissioner’s posting ends in 2009. In November 2007 we announced our intention of holding a hearing with Mr McConnell before he took up his post.³

Background to Mr McConnell

6. After graduating from Stirling University and practising as a mathematics teacher, Mr McConnell was elected to Stirling District Council in 1984, and became leader of the ruling Labour administration in 1990. From 1992 to 1998 he served as General Secretary of the Scottish Labour Party. In 1999 he was elected to the Scottish Parliament, and served successively as Minister for Finance, Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs, and (from 2001) First Minister. He was re-elected First Minister after the Scottish elections of 2003. After the 2007 elections, in which Labour lost power to the Scottish National Party, he resigned as party leader. He has retained his seat in the Scottish Parliament.

1 Ev 1-2

2 Foreign Affairs Committee, First Report of Session 2006-07, *The Work of the Committee in 2005 and 2006*, HC 206, para 54. The individuals were Helen Liddell (High Commissioner to Australia) and Paul Boateng (High Commissioner to South Africa).

3 Foreign Affairs Committee, First Report of Session 2007-08, *Foreign and Commonwealth Office Annual Report 2006-07*, HC 50, para 200

Role as High Commissioner

7. Mr McConnell has had a long-standing relationship with Malawi. In part this reflects the history of links between Malawi and Scotland, dating back to the time of David Livingstone and the Scottish missionary effort in that country in the Nineteenth Century. As First Minister, Mr McConnell made a much-publicised visit to Malawi in May 2005, and in November that year he signed a “Co-operation Agreement” with President Mutharika, outlining ways in which Scotland and Malawi would help each other, in particular in the areas of health, education and sustainable development.⁴ Following his resignation as Scottish Labour leader, he has worked on a voluntary basis for the Clinton Hunter Development Initiative in Malawi and Rwanda.

8. Mr McConnell informed us that he first became aware that the post of High Commissioner to Malawi would shortly become vacant and that he was being considered for the post when the Prime Minister raised it with him in July 2007. The announcement of his appointment was made in August 2007.

9. In his written evidence, Mr McConnell gave us a number of assurances, including the following:

I don't have any business or financial connections or other commitments that would give rise to a conflict of interest in carrying out my duties as High Commissioner to Malawi.

I would not find it difficult to work in an impartial civil service and I will report to the Foreign Secretary appointed by the Prime Minister of the day.

I have no plans to seek further employment with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office following completion of my term as High Commissioner.⁵

10. With regard to experience and skills relevant to the job, he told us that “I have no doubt that I have the relevant skills and experience to perform the job of High Commissioner to Malawi”, but he added that in some areas he would need to acquire new knowledge and skills: “[i]n terms of skill areas that I need to develop further, I know there will be a period of induction when these will be identified and guidance will be provided”.⁶

11. In oral evidence we explored with Mr McConnell the question of his suitability for the post, his past connection with Malawi, and his assessment of the challenges facing that country and his future role as Her Majesty's Government's principal representative there. We considered issues including Malawi's economy, its development strategy, its human rights record, its politics and governance, its handling of the HIV/Aids crisis, and its relations with other countries.⁷

4 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/International-Relations/internationaldevelopment/malawi/agreement>

5 Ev 1-2

6 Ibid.

7 See Ev 9-12

12. We asked Mr McConnell about his contract with the FCO. He told that this has not yet been signed, but he anticipated it would be a three-year, fixed-term contract.⁸ He said that it was not the usual practice for the FCO publicly to disclose the terms and conditions of people appointed to diplomatic posts, but he added:

I would want to be absolutely clear with the Committee that at no time have I suggested and at no time has anyone suggested to me that the terms and conditions, the salary, the other arrangements for this post would either be better or worse than they would normally have been for any other incumbent. There has been no suggestion on my part or anyone else's part that that would be case.⁹

13. We also explored with Mr McConnell the question of when he would take up his new duties. He said that he had not yet agreed a starting date with the FCO.¹⁰ It would be at some stage after the present High Commissioner leaves his post in January 2009, but he could not confirm that he would assume his new duties in 2009: "I do not have any expectation that the new position will start early next year – or even next year".¹¹ He confirmed that there would be no period in which he was both an MSP and a High Commissioner,¹² and said that "when we have an agreed starting date, I anticipate leaving the Scottish Parliament a few months before I am due to start in Malawi".¹³ When asked if there will therefore be a by-election in the Scottish Parliament, Mr McConnell replied, "Depending on the starting date for the position, that may well be the case".¹⁴ He also noted that the next scheduled date for a Scottish general election is 2011,¹⁵ and gave the Committee an assurance that "the starting date would not be influenced by an effort to pick a particular date for a by-election".¹⁶

14. We conclude that the undertakings Mr McConnell has given if he is appointed High Commissioner to Malawi are to be welcomed, as is his past experience of promoting Scottish and UK relations with Malawi, and his evident personal commitment to this process. We further conclude that it is right that questions should be asked when a politician is appointed to a senior diplomatic post, and we believe that such appointments should continue to be made only in exceptional circumstances, and that they should be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. However, subject to the satisfactory resolution of the issue we raise in the next paragraph, we are satisfied, on the evidence made available to the Committee, that both the FCO and Mr McConnell have conducted themselves without impropriety in relation to this proposed appointment, and we wish Mr McConnell well in his new post.

8 Q 32

9 Q 28

10 Q 16

11 Q 35

12 Q 24

13 Q 33

14 Q 25

15 Q 34

16 Q 37

15. We wish to add one rider to the above comments. We are surprised that Mr McConnell raised the possibility that a lengthy period might arise between the departure of his predecessor as High Commissioner in January 2009 and his own starting date, and that he would not rule out his continuing to be a member of the Scottish Parliament for an extended period. **We conclude that it would be very unsatisfactory for there to be a lengthy interregnum in which no High Commissioner is in post. It would be equally unsatisfactory for Mr McConnell to continue to perform the duties of a Member of the Scottish Parliament, at the same time that he is preparing to undertake the politically impartial duties of a British diplomat. We recommend that the FCO and Mr McConnell should resolve this issue swiftly, and make a public announcement that Mr McConnell will take up post on a specified date within the first half of 2009.**

3 Future scrutiny of diplomatic appointments

16. As we have noted in paragraph 4 above, it has been our long-standing policy to submit to scrutiny any major diplomatic or consular appointment of a person from outside the diplomatic service. Such appointments are rare,¹⁷ and where the person appointed is a politician or a person with close links to the governing party, it is understandable that there may be public concern that the usual process of appointment on merit is being set aside. For this reason we believe it is essential that Parliament should play a role in scrutinising any such appointments.

17. We are therefore concerned that the Government, in its own recent proposals to encourage select committees to hold ‘pre-appointment hearings’ on a more systematic basis, does not accept that “major diplomatic or consular appointments of a person from outside the diplomatic service” should be one of the categories of appointment it recognises as suitable for this kind of scrutiny.¹⁸

18. The Liaison Committee has raised this issue with the Government and has supported our view that this category should be added to the Government’s list.¹⁹ We trust that the Liaison Committee will continue to press this issue with Ministers.

19. We re-emphasise our commitment to giving such outside appointments full scrutiny where appropriate. This is a matter which falls squarely within our Standing Orders from the House (“to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its associated public bodies”). It is entirely in the public interest for such scrutiny to be carried out, and we are the appropriate parliamentary body to do so. We recommend that the Government should publicly acknowledge this, and should undertake to give us such assistance as is necessary in carrying out this task.

17 A list of non-diplomats appointed to senior diplomatic postings since 1945 is set out as an Annex to this Report.

18 See Liaison Committee, First Report of Session 2007-08, *Pre-appointment hearings by select committees* (HC 384), para 10 and Annex A

19 *Ibid.*, paras 11 and 16

20. We also intend, as part of our forthcoming inquiry into the FCO's annual report for 2007-08, to examine some of the wider issues raised by Mr McConnell's proposed appointment, and by the previous appointments set out in the Annex to this Report.

Annex

Non-diplomats/officials appointed to senior diplomatic postings since 1945

David Ormsby-Gore (5th Baron Harlech)

1950-1961: Conservative MP for Oswestry

1961-1965: HMA to USA

Derick Heathcoat-Amory (Viscount Amory)

1945-1960: Conservative MP for Tiverton (inc Chancellor of the Exchequer 58-60)

1961-1963: High Commissioner to Canada

John Freeman

1945-55: Labour MP for Watford

1961-1965: Editor of the New Statesman

1965-68: High Commissioner to India

1969-71: HMA to USA

Sir Christopher Soames (now Baron Soames)

1950-1966: Conservative MP for Bedford (inc Secretary of State for War 58-60)

1968-1972: HMA to France

Ivor Richard, Baron Richard

1964-1974: Labour MP for Barons Court

1974-1979: UK Permanent Representative to the UN

Later Leader of the House of Lords.

Peter Jay

Economics Editor, The Times

1977-1979: HMA to USA

Chris Patten, (now Baron Patten of Barnes)

1979-1992: Conservative MP for Bath (for a time Conservative Party Chairman)

1992-1997: Governor of Hong Kong

David Waddington (now Baron Waddington)

1968-1990: Conservative MP (including as Home Secretary 89-90)

1990-1992: Lord Privy Seal

1992-1997: Governor of Bermuda

Richard Luce (now Baron Luce)

1971-1974: Conservative MP for Arundel and Shoreham

1974-1992: Conservative MP for Shoreham (including as Minister of State, FCO)

1997-2000: Governor of Gibraltar

Alastair Goodlad (now Baron Goodlad)

1974-1999: Conservative MP (including as Chief Whip)

1999-2005: High Commissioner to Australia

Helen Liddell

1994-2005: Labour MP (including as Secretary of State for Scotland)

2005- : High Commissioner to Australia

Paul Boateng

1987-2005: Labour MP for Brent South

2005- : High Commissioner to South Africa

Formal Minutes

Wednesday 18 June 2008

Members present:

Mike Gapes, in the Chair

Sir Menzies Campbell	Sandra Osborne
Mr David Heathcoat-Amory	Mr Greg Pope
Mr Eric Illsley	Mr Ken Purchase
Mr Malcolm Moss	Sir John Stanley

The Committee deliberated.

Sir Menzies Campbell declared a potential conflict of interest, and withdrew.

Draft Report (*Proposed appointment of Rt Hon Jack McConnell MSP as High Commissioner to Malawi*), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 2 to 4 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 5 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 6 to 9 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 10 read, as follows:

Mr McConnell also told us that "I have decided to remain as a Member of the Scottish Parliament because I feel I have a duty to my constituents to work on their behalf".

Paragraph disagreed to.

Paragraphs 11 to 14 read and agreed to (now paragraphs 10 to 13).

Paragraph 15 read and amended (now paragraph 14).

Another Amendment proposed, at the end to add "We recommend that when politicians and others from outside the Diplomatic Service are proposed for appointment to diplomatic posts, the requirement under article 2(1)(a) of the Diplomatic Service Order in Council 1991 for the appointment to be made on merit on the basis of fair and open competition is adhered to, and is not made the subject of an exception under Schedule 2 of the Order as in Mr McConnell's case."—(*Sir John Stanley*.)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 2
Mr Malcolm Moss
Sir John Stanley

Noes, 5
Sir Menzies Campbell
Mr Eric Illsley
Sandra Osborne
Mr Greg Pope
Mr Ken Purchase

Paragraph, as amended, agreed to.

Paragraphs 16 to 19 read and agreed to (now paragraphs 15 to 18).

Paragraph 20 read, amended and agreed to (now paragraph 19).

Paragraph 21 read and agreed to (now paragraph 20).

Annex agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report, as amended, be the Sixth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Written evidence was ordered to be reported to the House for printing with the Report.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 25 June at 2 p.m.]

Witnesses

Wednesday 23 April 2008

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Rt Hon Jack McConnell MSP

Ev 2

List of written evidence

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| 1 | Letter to the Rt Hon Jack McConnell MSP from the Clerk of the Committee | Ev 1 |
| 2 | Written questions put by the Committee to Rt Hon Jack McConnell MSP in advance of the evidence session on 23 April, together with Mr McConnell's responses | Ev 1 |

Oral and written evidence

Taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee

on Wednesday 23 April 2008

Members present:

Mike Gapes (Chairman)

Mr. Fabian Hamilton
Mr. John Horam
Mr. Paul Keetch
Mr. Malcolm Moss

Sandra Osborne
Mr. Ken Purchase
Rt. Hon. Sir John Stanley
Ms Gisela Stuart

Letter to the Rt Hon Jack McConnell MSP from the Clerk of the Committee

The Foreign Affairs Committee considers the scrutiny of the appointment of individuals outside the diplomatic service to senior diplomatic posts to be an important part of its remit. Members of the Committee have therefore taken a close interest in the announcement that you will become the next British High Commissioner to Malawi when the current High Commissioner's posting ends in 2009.

In its annual report on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Annual Report 2006–07, the Committee expressed its intention to hold a hearing with you before you take up your new post.¹ I would like to invite you to come and give oral evidence to the Committee on Wednesday 26 March at 2.30pm.

I look forward to hearing from you.

December 2007

Scrutiny of Senior Diplomatic Appointment

WRITTEN QUESTIONS PUT BY THE COMMITTEE TO RT HON JACK MCCONNELL MSP IN ADVANCE OF THE EVIDENCE SESSION ON 23 APRIL, TOGETHER WITH MR MCCONNELL'S RESPONSES

Questionnaire

1. *When were you approached and how did you learn (a) that the post of High Commissioner to Malawi would shortly become vacant, and (b) that you were being considered to fill the post?*

A. I first learned that the post of High Commissioner to Malawi would shortly become vacant and that I was being considered for the post when the Prime Minister raised it with me in July 2007.

2. *Do you have any business or financial connections or other commitments which might give rise to a conflict of interest in carrying out your duties as High Commissioner to Malawi?*

A. I don't have any business or financial connections or other commitments that would give rise to a conflict of interest in carrying out my duties as High Commissioner to Malawi.

3. *How can you demonstrate that you have the skills and experience to perform a job that is usually performed by a career diplomat?*

A. With regards to having the relevant skills to take up this position, I have no doubt that I have the relevant skills and experience to perform the job of High Commissioner to Malawi. I have wide international experience, most recently from my time as First Minister of Scotland.

¹ Foreign Affairs Committee, First Report of Session 2007–08, *Foreign and Commonwealth Office Annual Report 2006–07*, HC 50, paras 199–200

4. *Are there any skill areas held by career diplomats that you feel you will need to develop further before taking up this position?*

A. In terms of skill areas that I need to develop further, I know there will be a period of induction when these will be identified and guidance will be provided.

5. *Given your political background, do you think it will be difficult to work in an impartial civil service setting? Are you prepared to report to a Foreign Secretary who is not from the Labour Party?*

A. I would not find it difficult to work in an impartial civil service and I will report to the Foreign Secretary appointed by the Prime Minister of the day.

6. *Why have you decided to remain a Member of the Scottish Parliament after your appointment as High Commissioner has been announced?*

A. I have decided to remain as a Member of the Scottish Parliament because I feel I have a duty to my constituents to work on their behalf.

7. *Do you anticipate that you will seek further employment with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office following the completion of your term as High Commissioner?*

A. I have no plans to seek further employment with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office following completion of my term as High Commissioner.

8. *What will be the key developmental and political challenges facing the next High Commissioner to Malawi?*

A. The key developmental and political challenges facing the next High Commissioner to Malawi are likely to be the upcoming elections in Malawi in 2009 and the political situation in Zimbabwe in the wider context of Southern Africa.

9. *As High Commissioner, will you encourage Scotland to maintain its independent international aid programme to Malawi? What relationship will you have with Scotland's aid effort?*

A. All major UK parties support the programme so I expect to be able to assist as part of my wider UK duties.

10. *How do you anticipate working with DFID in determining how it spends its aid budget in Malawi?*

A. It is essentially for DFID to determine how that budget is distributed. I would expect to assist and contribute when appropriate.

17 April 2008

Witness: Mr. Jack McConnell MSP, prospective High Commissioner to Malawi, gave evidence.

Q1 Chairman: Ladies and gentlemen, before we begin may I ask everybody to turn their mobile phones off or put them on silent?

Jack, thank you for coming today. This is an innovation in the hearings that the Committee has held over the years. In the previous Parliament, we expressed a view that when somebody was appointed to an ambassadorial post or to be a high commissioner, and did not come from the diplomatic service, we should hold a hearing about that appointment, but events meant that it was not possible to do so before the 2005 election. Given that your appointment was announced such a long time in advance, we have had an opportunity to bring in this innovation. As you are probably aware, the Cabinet Office is currently considering the question of appointments to public bodies. As a Committee, we are of the view that appointments in the diplomatic service should be included in that category.

We sent you a questionnaire and you very kindly replied on 17 April. Some of the questions that we raise will no doubt relate to those points. May I begin by asking you to set the scene for the discussion by taking us through the sequence of events leading up to the announcement by the Prime Minister that you will be the next High Commissioner to Malawi? How did that evolve?

Mr. McConnell: Thank you for the opportunity to be here. It is a pleasure to be part of an innovation, and I hope that what I am able to say is useful for the Committee in every respect. This may be a useful experience for the Committee as things move on in the future.

When filling in the questionnaire, I tried to remember precise dates, but it was difficult to do so. I am pretty certain that the initial conversation between the Prime Minister and myself took place in July last year, when he put to me that this would be an opportunity and a job in which I could serve the

23 April 2008 Mr Jack McConnell MSP

Government and the country well. I thought about it for two or three weeks and consulted a few colleagues privately. I indicated to the Prime Minister in August that I would be honoured to accept the position. We then discussed timing. At that time, I was considering my position in the Scottish Parliament and my future. I decided in early August that I would resign as leader of the Labour party in Scotland following the election result last year. I decided that I wanted to make that position public in advance of the Scottish Parliament resuming after the summer recess. There were some other discussions between the Prime Minister and myself about a date on which there would be an announcement. It was finally announced on 15 August. That is what I recall. I am certain that there would have been discussions in Whitehall at the time, given the need for such discussions, but I was not party to them.

Q2 Chairman: Are you aware of anybody else being considered for the position before the Prime Minister spoke to you?

Mr. McConnell: No, I am not.

Q3 Chairman: Are you aware of any process that took place before you were approached?

Mr. McConnell: No. I never asked about process. I assumed, from what the Prime Minister said to me at the time, that the reasons why I was being asked to consider the position were, first, my Government experience, and secondly, my interest in Malawi. He has a passionate interest in Africa—I knew that obviously—and he felt that I could do a job for the Government there. What other considerations he had, or which other people may or may not have come into his mind, are not things about which I would have asked him at the time.

Q4 Chairman: We will come on to specific questions about Malawi, but on the general point of appointment processes, do you think that it is right that there is this kind of informal arrangement whereby—whatever the individual, I am not commenting on your appointment—the Prime Minister approaches someone and says, “Would you like to have a job for the next x number of years?”, and the job is not advertised or open to any formal process?

Mr. McConnell: The Government have a pretty open policy of sometimes recruiting people with appropriate skills and experience into senior posts in the civil service or the diplomatic service. That is a stated policy of theirs. They have the right to do that under the diplomatic orders from 1991, and successive Prime Ministers have chosen to do so. It is not for me to express an opinion as to whether they should follow the same process at all times. I would imagine that from time to time they choose different processes to select people for those kinds of positions.

Q5 Chairman: You are not the first active politician who has been appointed as an ambassador or a high commissioner. We all know about Peter Jay, and

under a Conservative Government there was Alastair Goodlad, and then Paul Boateng and Helen Liddell from the last Cabinet before the 2005 election. There are others who went off to serve, even during the Wilson Government. Do the Foreign Office need to develop some formal criteria to govern how appointments of non-diplomats are made?

Mr. McConnell: I am not sure that I have the experience to express an opinion on that. There may not be written criteria for such appointments, but I imagine that the kind of criteria considered either by a Prime Minister—or for that matter by the Cabinet Secretary or the head of the Foreign Office—in any discussions about such an appointment would be fairly obvious, and would include someone’s experience, their personality, the nature of the position and the challenges that are coming up. I do not feel qualified at the moment to express an opinion as to whether or not there should be criteria, and what those criteria might be.

Q6 Ms Stuart: Let me venture a prediction. The Foreign Office has made a commitment to bring more and more outsiders in, but whenever they do so there is an application process, because no one would suggest that it is obvious that they have the necessary skills. If we make non-political appointments like that, there will have to be a process of defining skills. The Committee has just conducted an inquiry on the Overseas Territories in which people said that when governors were appointed they did not know what their skills were. I think that there will be a greater process of accountability. Given what you have just gone through with your appointment, you must have some idea of what processes it would be appropriate to look at. We are into new territory, so it is your chance to set the scene and explain how you think greater accountability might take shape.

Mr. McConnell: I understand that point. I have had similar discussions in the Scottish Parliament over the past few years, and I understand the Committee’s interest in this issue. I am also aware that inside the civil service, and certainly inside the diplomatic service, appointments are made to most positions following an indication of interest either from people at a more junior level or from individuals who want to move across. However, many, many appointments are made inside the civil and diplomatic services by the most senior manager identifying someone whom they wish to take on, and recruiting them into that position. That happens across the civil service, in every department. I understand the desire for criteria, but the current absence of criteria is not necessarily inconsistent with the way in which appointments are made in the civil service and the diplomatic service at the moment.

Q7 Ms Stuart: I am sure that there are criteria in the civil service—I would be extremely surprised if that were not the case. However, the logic of your thought—you say that you are content with appointments without criteria—almost suggests an

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act of political patronage. That is the way he picks his Cabinet Ministers; in a Cabinet reshuffle, you do not have to recruit people. The logic would only work if your appointment fell with that Administration, and a new, incoming Administration chose a new high commissioner to a country. However, that is not the case, is it? You have a fixed term.

Mr. McConnell: There would be a contract with a term of appointment, that is certainly true. Can I just make clear my view on the criteria? It is not that I do not think that there should be criteria; I do not have a view on whether there should be criteria. I do not think that it is really for me to comment—it is entirely for the Committee and the Government to exchange views on that matter.

Q8 Sir John Stanley: Mr. McConnell, I think your appointment breaks new ground in one respect. I am trying to do this from memory, but as I recall all the previous political appointments to diplomatic posts have all been in what might broadly be described as major countries: John Freeman to India, Sir Christopher Soames to Paris, Peter Jay to Washington, Alastair Goodlad and Helen Liddell to Australia, and Paul Boateng to South Africa. Yours, if I recall correctly, is the very first appointment to a country, which—with the greatest respect to Malawi—would not describe itself as a major country in political, economic and strategic terms. Is this a new policy, as far as the present Government are concerned? Is this going to open the way to a significantly larger number of diplomatic appointments being filled politically? If that was the case, I think that there would be rising concern in the professional diplomatic service about that particular trend. Would you like to respond?

Mr. McConnell: I have not heard, privately or publicly, any suggestion that that would be the case. I understand the fact that this appointment is—you are right—slightly different from previous appointments, in terms of the nature of the posting, but at no time has there been any public hint—or privately, in discussion with the Prime Minister—that it would lead to a significant number of, or even any, additional appointments beyond what has been the norm or the accepted number in the past. If you look back through all those appointments, the number of former politicians who have been appointed either to head of mission posts or governorships has pretty much been one or two in each Administration. I do not think it ever went above two, if we look back over the past 40 years. My understanding is that the term of office for at least one of the incumbents will end next year, and therefore that the general position of two will still be in place, so I do not think that there is any suggestion that there would be an increase. However, that is not something on which I feel able to be definitive. You would really have to ask the Government about that matter.

Q9 Sir John Stanley: It is the case that diplomatic posts have been offered as consolation prizes, if I may put it like that, to individuals who have suffered road blocks or disappointments in their career in this

country, and that is certainly true of an appointment to which I previously referred: Alastair Goodlad's appointment as High Commissioner to Australia followed circumstances in which he was expected to become a commissioner in Brussels but that did not happen. Do you think that your appointment is a consolation prize?

Mr. McConnell: I do not think so, and I certainly hope that no one would view it that way. I do not think that it is viewed that way in Malawi. If the Prime Minister wanted to offer me a consolation prize for last year's election result or if I was looking for one, there are other, less serious jobs that might have been suggested, if I may put it that way. The High Commissioner's job in Malawi is to represent this country in one of the 10 poorest countries in the world. It is a serious job and I take it very seriously. I do not view it as a consolation prize, I do not think that the Prime Minister did so and I certainly do not think that the Government of Malawi do.

Q10 Mr. Keetch: May I follow up the point that Gisela Stuart made about the political nature of your appointment and the consequences of a change of Government here? If there had been a general election last year and if a Liberal Democrat or Conservative Government had come in, the Foreign Secretary of the day might not have wanted you to go to Malawi. If there is a change of Government at Westminster during your term of office, is there any provision in your contract for the incoming Foreign Secretary to be able to remove you, or would you find it uncomfortable being in such a situation in Malawi with another party in power in Westminster?

Mr. McConnell: I cannot imagine circumstances in which that situation would become uncomfortable, but if it did so, either for the Foreign Secretary or for me, there are ways in which those things can be discussed in the diplomatic service and the Foreign Office. However, I cannot imagine circumstances in which that would be the case. Obviously, I speak regularly with colleagues in the Government and I have spoken regularly with my future colleagues in the Foreign Office since the announcement last August. I have also spoken to colleagues at a senior level in other parties about the nature of the job, their ambitions for Africa and their interests in Malawi, so I do not anticipate any problems with that whatsoever.

Q11 Mr. Keetch: Although it is possibly not the case in relation to the high commissionership in Malawi, had you been appointed to NATO, the UN or to one of the more major posts that we discussed earlier, as a point of principle there could well be a conflict of interest if someone of one political colour is appointed if the colour of the Government back in the UK changed. Do you recognise that that could be the case?

Mr. McConnell: I recognise that that could be an issue, but I also think that it would be a pretty bad situation if someone outside the diplomatic service were appointed to those positions who was not aware of the sensitivity of those circumstances and was not able to deal with them. I would imagine that anyone

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who is appointed to those positions, whether Chris Patten in Hong Kong in 1992 or me in Malawi in 2009, would be perfectly able to make judgments about who they can and cannot work with. You do not take on a position like this without being serious about it and being willing to work with the Government of the day, and I am.

Q12 Sandra Osborne: In relation to Sir John's point about this particular country not being one of the big ones, as you and I both know, Malawi has strong historic links with Scotland, through our colonial past, and, even today, through the Church of Scotland. Do you think that that had any bearing on the Prime Minister's decision to appoint you, in addition to your own experience in Malawi?

We already have a different Administration in the Scottish Parliament from the UK Government. As I understand it, the Malawi links and the Malawi project took place on a cross-party basis and the present SNP Administration intend to continue with that. Do you see any problems for your role in dealing with the current SNP-led Executive?

Mr. McConnell: I do not want to put words in the Prime Minister's mouth, but obviously he would not have offered me this position if it were not for that development—the renewal of that link with Malawi over the last three years—and had it not been successful. He is an admirer of what we did and what we continue to do in Scotland in the link with Malawi. He raised that with me at the time. He feels that the UK Government should support that link and that this is a way of doing so. As well as representing the UK's interests in Malawi, there would be an opportunity through the High Commission to provide continuity of support to the Scotland-Malawi link.

On the second point, one of the remarkable features of the renewal of the Scotland-Malawi link has been its all-party nature. The Conservative, Ted Brocklebank in the Scottish Parliament describes the Malawi link as the best thing that the Scottish Parliament has done since 1999. He may not think that the Scottish Parliament has done many other good things, but members of all parties have been very supportive of and active in pursuing the link.

Since last August, I think that I have shown an ability to work with the new Ministers on this link, which perhaps relates to the question about working with different Administrations in the UK. I work closely with the new Minister with responsibility, Linda Fabiani. I have even had the pleasure of a discussion with the new First Minister on the topic of Malawi. I work with the other parties in the Scottish Parliament as well as with my own party. On this issue, it has been possible to be non-partisan, non-party political and to show that the link, in many ways, is about the people of Scotland and Malawi, rather than necessarily about the Government.

Q13 Mr. Purchase: To follow up on that, Mr. McConnell, most political parties have a number of factions that, from time to time, provide troublesome episodes. You were general secretary of the Scottish Labour party at one point. Did you ever have a

problem carrying out an instruction with which perhaps you did not agree? You might get a good many from here that you do not agree with, but it would be interesting to know how you dealt with that at a personal and political level.

Mr. McConnell: I am sure that the Committee will have some information on my background. Most recently, I have been in charge of my own destiny. When I was First Minister, I was the boss, and therefore I could direct things. Prior to that I spent two and a half years as a member of the Cabinet, working under Donald Dewar, whom I greatly admired, although we did not always agree. I was his Finance Minister and I carried out his wishes—working under Henry McLeish, despite the fact that he and I had hotly contested an election for the position and I had lost. I also worked as Education, Europe and External Affairs Minister for Henry McLeish; I think that everyone would say that I did so successfully.

Prior to that, as general secretary of the Scottish Labour party, at times I was able to take executive action under my own steam, but at other times an executive committee or the general secretary of the party in the UK would make the decision. Prior to that, I was a mathematics teacher and my principal teacher set the tone for the business of the department, and I did what I had to do. So I am perfectly able and I am looking forward to this position. I am perfectly able to be Britain's representative in Malawi, be high commissioner, run the office and be in charge there, but I am also entirely capable of working under the direction of the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office, which would be in overall control of the direction of travel.

Mr. Purchase: Thank you.

Q14 Mr. Hamilton: Apart from your well-publicised knowledge of Malawi, what personal qualities will you bring to the post of High Commissioner?

Mr. McConnell: I hope that I would bring my experience first of all. That would be not only as First Minister of Scotland, but previously as the Minister responsible for external relations under both Donald Dewar and Henry McLeish. In all those positions over eight years, I had extensive contact with embassies and high commissions abroad, and I probably dealt with more than half the British embassies in the European Union. I dealt with the Canadian High Commission, the Washington Embassy, consulates elsewhere in the US, the Embassy in China, the High Commissions in Australia, South Africa, Malawi and elsewhere. I have experience and knowledge about how Britain is represented overseas. Despite having represented the devolved Government, I have an ability to work with those representatives in a flexible, positive and constructive manner. I have experience of leadership and of Malawi that I would bring to the job, and I hope that I would also bring a personality and style that would be good for the British Government, good for Britain and good for Malawi. I have a constructive, honest relationship with the Malawi

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Government that has never caused any of us any difficulties but has in many ways been helpful for both countries.

Q15 Mr. Hamilton: We will explore your knowledge of Malawi a little later, but if this had been an open competition for the job, how would you have pitched your bid for it, apart from the points that you have just made about your obvious experience and connections? What else would you throw into the ring?

Mr. McConnell: Perhaps I could go back to Sir John's point about the comparison between the posting in Malawi and postings elsewhere. If I had applied for this job, I think that in the interview I would have brought a knowledge of Malawi, an enthusiasm for the position and a desire to throw myself into it with energy and determination, that might have been a bit different from many others. I can honestly say that I am excited about the prospect of taking on this role. For someone who has previously been in a senior political position, with a variety of life experiences, coming into this kind of position is a bit different and unique, and it would be noticed in that respect. Therefore, I would be very effective in the role in Malawi as a result.

Q16 Mr. Hamilton: British diplomats and the diplomatic service are well recognised and well known for being entirely politically impartial. You are still a member of the Scottish Parliament. When will you resign your post as an MSP? I know that we have touched on this already, but how will you reassure people who might believe that you will be politically partial because of your previous role and experience?

Mr. McConnell: On the first point, I have not yet agreed a starting date with the FCO. As announced by the Prime Minister last August, it would be some time after January next year. Obviously, that decision would come before any decision to leave the Scottish Parliament. On the point of political impartiality, it has not been easy to be, at least to some extent, politically impartial in the new environment in Scotland over the last 10 months. I have many opinions about what is going on here and there, but I think that most observers of the political scene in Scotland over the last 10 months would say that I have managed consistently from 15 August last year to take a step back from party politics and to work with people from different parties on issues that I care about—not only Malawi but one or two other issues as well—and to try to build bridges.

I have also had appropriate conversations with the Conservative Front-Bench International Development spokespeople about Malawi and about their views. I also had considerable discussions with Sir Menzies when he was leader of the Liberal Democrats, which is one of the reasons he is not here today, so I think I have made a pretty clear effort since last August to be as non-partisan as possible and that is how I wanted it to be.

Q17 Mr. Hamilton: You have made clear a lot of the skills and abilities that you will bring to the post, but clearly, the skills sets that career diplomats have are different to yours—they must be. Have you made any arrangements with the FCO to learn some of the skills that you will need as a diplomat, which you may not have already acquired through your experience as First Minister and in party politics?

Mr. McConnell: Yes, I have. To give you an example, it is planned that whenever we set a date for me to start in Malawi I will spend a period in advance of that shadowing an existing High Commissioner in a similar sub-Saharan African country. A lot of thought has been given to this, both by them and by me.

Q18 Mr. Hamilton: Will some of the training, or some of the skill acquiring that you will need to do, happen after you take up the post? Is that how the Foreign Office works, or would it expect you to undergo a lot of the training before you take up the post and then be left to get on with the job?

Mr. McConnell: I think the most important elements would take place beforehand.

Q19 Mr. Horam: Why do you want to carry on as an MSP?

Mr. McConnell: I think in any walk of life—not only in politics, but in business and in other organisations—if you have been in the central leadership position of any organisation it is difficult for your successors, and probably also for yourself, if you hang around too long. That is why people who have chaired the board or been chief executive of a major company do not then become deputy chief executive or a member of the board and it is why senior politicians move on as well. I think that is right. I have tried not to be a constant presence looking over the shoulder of Alex Salmond, whether I agree or disagree with what he is doing.

Q20 Mr. Horam: You will lose the job as an MSP as well. You say in your letter to us: “I have decided to remain as a Member of the Scottish Parliament because I feel I have a duty to my constituents to work on their behalf”². That duty has not gone away; you were elected to represent them and you may have to give up halfway through.

Mr. McConnell: That is possible. That would obviously be determined by the starting date of the position, but that is a judgment that my constituents would understand.

Q21 Mr. Horam: When will the vacancy actually occur?

Mr. McConnell: The current High Commissioner leaves at the end of January next year, but the Foreign Office does not announce the successor or the agreed contractual starting date until nearer the time.

Q22 Mr. Horam: But the expectation will be that you would take over in January next year?

² Ev 2., 6A.

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Mr. McConnell: I think the expectation is that I would take over at an appropriate point after January next year.

Q23 Mr. Horam: That could not be too long.

Mr. McConnell: We are still in discussion about that and I am not at liberty to comment on that today.

Q24 Mr. Horam: There would not be a period when you were both an MSP and a High Commissioner?

Mr. McConnell: There would not be a period when I am both an MSP and a High Commissioner.

Q25 Mr. Horam: So we would have to have a by-election in the Scottish Parliament?

Mr. McConnell: Depending on the starting date for the position, that may well be the case.

Mr. Horam: Right.

Q26 Mr. Keetch: You answered Mr. Hamilton's question about any concerns you might have about you being a Labour party official. I am frankly, with respect, more worried about the fact that you are a Scot and that you are the former First Minister of Scotland because you are there not to represent Scotland, but to represent Britain. If I were an English businessman wanting to do business in Malawi and there was a Scottish businessman wanting to do the same sort of business, my concern would be that because of your involvement in Malawi through the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Executive and so on, somehow you might be more favourable to that Scottish side than to the English or the Welsh. I cannot quite understand what the Scottish Executive is doing giving aid to Malawi or anywhere else. Are we going to have a situation where you have a Welsh ambassador in Patagonia because they speak Welsh?

Why is there this link between Scotland and Malawi? I can understand the historical link and the Church of Scotland link, but I cannot understand what the Scottish Executive are doing spending £2 million of aid in Malawi. If I were an English or a Welsh businessman seeking to do business in Malawi, my concern would not be that you were a Labour party man, but that Scotland would be represented well out there, but England, Wales and Northern Ireland might not be.

Mr. McConnell: Can I address both those points? I think there are two points. On the geographical impartiality of the position, as much as its political impartiality, I would not have taken on this position if I did not intend to serve the whole United Kingdom and do so in an even-handed and constructive manner. It may be useful, particularly for this Committee and not just in connection with this post, for me to stress that the relationship between Scotland and Malawi that has been renewed these last three years is not about a relatively small aid budget that supports development projects. It is very much in keeping with the Scotland Act.

The Scotland Act said that the new devolved Government of Scotland back in 1999 could act overseas in support of the work of the British

Government, which is what we were doing. We liaised very carefully and closely with Hilary Benn, who was then Secretary of State for International Development. He was very encouraging of what we did. We took the approach from 2004 onwards that any work we did in international development should encourage people-to-people contact and people-to-people support rather than try to duplicate or complicate the work of the Department for International Development.

The money that is allocated is not so much allocated as aid in the way that UK Government money is allocated as donor aid, it is allocated to support joint projects between Scotland and Malawi that have a practical impact in the country. For example, we support a clinics project which basically has doctors in Tayside in Scotland at the end of the phone to doctors in rural Malawi who can then get advice if they have a case in front on them. We support teacher exchanges. We support business exchanges which try to build up business in Malawi by giving advice from retired business people in Scotland. So it is all very practical, skills-based exchanges, rather than straightforward donor aid in the way that DFID would fund.

Q27 Mr. Keetch: But you would certainly be keen to encourage such things from the rest of the UK.

Mr. McConnell: I do already. For example, last Thursday I was involved in a discussion with St. Andrews University about a collaborative project that it has established with the University of Birmingham and perhaps another university in England. The medical schools of the three universities will be working with the University of Malawi medical school to increase the number of doctors in training in Malawi. That contact was made by me. Someone from Birmingham wrote to me. I put them in touch with St. Andrews. They got together and did all that. I am already working with people across the UK.

Mr. Keetch: I am grateful.

Q28 Sandra Osborne: Jack, for the record, could I ask you some questions about the terms and conditions of the appointment? Is it intended that your appointment as High Commissioner will be subject to any terms and conditions which differ from the routine terms and conditions of the diplomatic service? If so, what are they?

Mr. McConnell: We are still involved in discussions that will lead to the signing of a contract. I also understand that the Foreign Office does not normally discuss publicly the detailed terms and conditions of people who are appointed. But I would want to be absolutely clear with the Committee that at no time have I suggested and at no time has anyone suggested to me that the terms and conditions, the salary, the other arrangements for this post would either be better or worse than they would normally have been for any other incumbent. There has been no suggestion on my part or anyone else's part that that would be case.

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Q29 Sandra Osborne: Other than the general terms and conditions in the contract, are there any other negotiations still to take place in relation to your appointment?

Mr. McConnell: As I said, we are still discussing starting dates and other arrangements. That is not because there has been any disagreement or extended discussion, but simply that it was not a priority during the past six months for either them or me to sort out such detail. We shall do so during the next few months after which an appropriate agreement will be signed. Nobody is expecting it to be anything out of the ordinary.

Q30 Sandra Osborne: When would you expect to sign the contract?

Mr. McConnell: To be honest, I am not sure what the normal position would be, but whenever it would be normal to do so.

Q31 Sandra Osborne: Do you feel it appropriate for the Committee to have a copy of the contract?

Mr. McConnell: That is not a matter for me. It would be a matter for the Foreign Office.

Q32 Sandra Osborne: Will it be a fixed-term contract?

Mr. McConnell: I anticipate that it would be, yes. The assumption is that it will be a three-year, fixed-term contract.

Q33 Sir John Stanley: What is your expectation of how much longer you will continue as a Member of the Scottish Parliament?

Mr. McConnell: I do not have a particular expectation about that because we have not yet decided on a formal start date for the position in Malawi. When we have an agreed starting date, I anticipate leaving the Scottish Parliament a few months before I am due to start in Malawi.

Q34 Sir John Stanley: When does your present election period come to an end?

Mr. McConnell: The election last year was for four years, so the next formal general election date to the Scottish Parliament will be 2011.

Q35 Sir John Stanley: In the normal case, assuming that you took up your appointment at some point in 2009 there would be a by-election in your seat.

Mr. McConnell: If the appointment began in 2009, that would be the case. The Foreign Office has been very clear with me and I am very content with the position that it would not normally decide on the starting date of succeeding High Commissioners until nearer the end of the term of office of the existing High Commissioner. That is for all kinds of reasons, partly because conditions could change in the country and continuity might be wanted, or a period might be wanted when other skills are brought in to serve. I understand that completely. I do not have any expectation that the new position will start early next year—or even next year. That is

still to be determined, and it will be determined by the interests of the UK Government and the Foreign Office in Malawi and in the region.

Q36 Sir John Stanley: Is there any relationship between the date on which you take up the post as High Commissioner and the date and timing of the by-election in your seat?

Mr. McConnell: There have been no discussions between me and the FCO that would combine the issue of the by-election with the issue of the starting date. At no time has that come up in discussions with anybody in the Foreign Office.

Q37 Sir John Stanley: Can you give the Committee an unequivocal assurance that there will be no delay in your taking up your post as a result of the timing of the by-election considerations in your Scottish Parliament seat?

Mr. McConnell: I can give the Committee an assurance that the starting date would not be influenced by an effort to pick a particular date for a by-election, but I want to be very clear as the assumption is that the starting date is automatically 1 February next year because the current High Commissioner's posting comes to an end in January. The Prime Minister's announcement in August last year—it was agreed at the time with the Foreign Office—stated very clearly “at an appropriate time thereafter”, given that the current High Commissioner's posting comes to an end in January 2009. I understand exactly why that was said. A judgment has to be made about who is the right person to be High Commissioner at any given time in Malawi. Circumstances could change over the next few months that might lead to a different skills set being need for a certain time. I respect that. I have been very relaxed about it. I am relaxed about being in the Scottish Parliament for another 12 months or for longer. I do not mind. I am happy to take the advice of the Foreign Office about that rather than set terms that suit me or a party political interest.

Q38 Mr. Keetch: When did you first go to Malawi?

Mr. McConnell: I first went to Malawi in May 2005.

Q39 Mr. Keetch: Excellent. You are obviously working closely with the existing High Commissioner; well, you obviously know the High Commissioner. You mentioned that you will be spending some time with another High Commissioner in the run-up to your appointment. How will that work? Will it be like shadowing or an “internship”?

Mr. McConnell: It will be a shadowing period. The Foreign Office will chose the most appropriate person for me to shadow and I will spend some time with them as they carry out their duties.

Q40 Mr. Keetch: You mentioned that when you were First Minister you had connections with embassies and other high commissioners all over the world. Did you imagine then that you would one day be doing that role? Is it something that you thought about? Some of us on the Committee would like to

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think of ourselves as future ambassadors, high commissioners or governors. Did you ever think when you were First Minister that this might be a future career path that you might go down?

Mr. McConnell: No.

Q41 Mr. Keetch: So you have never had any ambition to go into this area.

Mr. McConnell: No.

Q42 Mr. Keetch: So the request by the Prime Minister to do this came totally out of the blue.

Mr. McConnell: Yes.

Mr. Keetch: Thank you.

Q43 Mr. Horam: To come back to an answer that you gave Sir John Stanley in relation to when you might take over, I got an impression that there might be certain circumstances in which you would not take over. You talked about different skill sets and different sets of circumstances.

Mr. McConnell: I was trying to be helpful to the Committee in saying that I understand why the Foreign Office neither in private—we have not yet agreed anything in private that I am not telling you—nor in public would want to be specific about a starting date. First, that is because there is an incumbent who must have the full authority of the position in the meantime. This is an unusual position with the successor being named. It is important that Richard Wildash, who is in position there, retains his full authority until the end of his posting. Secondly, the starting date should be determined by the interests of the British Government, not by my interests or the Labour party's interests in the Scottish Parliament.

Q44 Mr. Horam: Surely it would not be in the interests of the British Government to have a period of vacancy with nobody there. The incumbent's period of office is coming to an end in January next year. Surely the Government would not want there to be an interlude when nobody is there.

Mr. McConnell: I cannot speak for the head of the diplomatic service, but I am simply indicating to the Committee that I can understand why the starting date of a successor is not announced publicly too far in advance of the existing incumbent relinquishing their position.

Q45 Mr. Horam: I find that hard to understand, given that you have been nominated for this post and the incumbent is departing in January. All that is known. I am sure that the authority of the incumbent is not damaged in any way by the knowledge that you are the successor. I would not have thought that that would have any effect whatsoever. The only thing that I can think of is that the Government want some wriggle room when it comes to holding a by-election. That is the only thing that I can think might affect the timing of it; otherwise why would it matter in any way?

Mr. McConnell: I can honestly say to the Committee that there have been no discussions involving me. Others can speak for themselves, but there have been

no discussions between me and anybody in the UK Government at ministerial level about the starting date since my discussion with the Prime Minister last August. All of my discussions about my terms and conditions have been conducted with senior officials in the Foreign Office and they have been conducted very properly. I understand their reasons for wishing to be hesitant about details.

Q46 Mr. Horam: May I change the subject totally and come on to Malawi's economic performance? The slightly worrying thing about Malawi is that while on the one hand it is getting good reports from the International Monetary Fund about its economic development programme, the fact is, as you have said yourself, it is one of the 10 poorest countries in the world. There have been problems of starvation, crops have failed and so on in the last few years. That poses quite a challenge, does it not?

Mr. McConnell: It does. Clearly, the High Commissioner post is distinct from the position of the head of DFID in Malawi, who has a large budget. The UK is the largest donor, therefore, we have a serious interest in how donor aid is being spent there and in the effectiveness of the various programmes. My understanding is that the head of DFID in Malawi and the High Commissioner have a very good and constructive working relationship, and I would expect that to continue. I have had a personal and political interest in that area, but obviously I would respect the position of DFID and the fact that it is a separate Department, even if we all represent the UK's interests.

More generally, the economic position in Malawi has improved over the past few years—in the past two years it has seen growth rates of just over 7%, which is a significant improvement. Food supply and security in the country has significantly improved, compared to say 2003 or 2004, but the problems remain significant. It is still the case that more than 100 out of every 1,000 youngsters will die before the age of five, that life expectancy in the country is averaging 37 years—while in this country it is 79—and it has gone down, and 14% of the population are affected by HIV/AIDS, which is coming down slightly but is still a horrendously high figure. The development challenges in Malawi are massive, but it is a friendly country for the United Kingdom, and we are for Malawi. I would hope that, in the position of high commissioner, I can help Malawi. Ultimately, it needs to grow its own economy and be sustainable—it need not be dependent, in the way that it is currently. I think that I have a knowledge of the country that might be helpful to support it moving in that direction.

Q47 Mr. Horam: DFID, as part of the UK Government's presence there, and the international aid programme are such a large element for a country such as Malawi. That is a slightly unusual position by comparison with other countries. How does that affect what you see as your role as the putative high commissioner? Does that not box you in a bit, when so much is being decided by DFID?

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Mr. McConnell: I think it would be honest to say that that is one of the things that I thought about last summer, when I was asked to consider taking on the position. I think that the programme budget of the High Commissioner in Malawi is about £700,000 or so. The budget of DFID in Malawi is £70 million or so. It is a huge differential. Clearly, the significance of DFID's support for the country is felt by the Government there and by everyone involved. Having spoken to the High Commissioner and to the head of DFID in the country, I am struck by the very close working relationship that they have. As High Commissioner, despite my interest in development activities in the past, I would entirely respect the position of the head of DFID in the country. I have no doubt that we would have a constructive working relationship, having explored some of the issues with the current incumbents.

Q48 Ms Stuart: I have to confess that the more that I think about the time gap between the Prime Minister's announcement of you being the successor and the likelihood of you taking it up, the more puzzled I am by it. It is really quite extraordinary. Do you think that the Government need to explain why they made such an exception? I genuinely assumed that you had either already taken up the post or were about to, so there we are.

I want to ask you something quite specific. You mentioned the high percentage of the population who are HIV positive. I think that there are something like two trained doctors per 100,000 of the population, which is something like the lowest rate. Earlier you mentioned St. Andrews and Birmingham Universities—I think that the other is Manchester—which do the training together. Could you say a little more on your thoughts? How can you do more work to help Malawi to get out of what is a vicious trap, involving the absence of doctors and nurses and the high incidence of HIV?

Mr. McConnell: I have a strong view that, while donor aid—budget support—for developing countries, particularly those as poor as Malawi, is important for fairness and development in the world, in many ways one of the more significant things that we can do, not just in Scotland but across the UK, is develop the skills inside such countries, which allows them to develop their own sustainable public services and a sustainable growing economy. It is all very well donating budget support or having people from this country volunteer to spend some time in Malawi and give their skills, which is useful but short term. However, unless we use the skills that we have developed over hundreds of years we are not creating the sort of sustainable development that will make a long-term difference.

For example, in addition to the short-term benefits of teachers going to a country such as Malawi and spending time in classrooms to help to deal with teacher shortages, you have to increase the number of teachers in training, increase the salaries to keep them in the country, give them houses in the rural areas so that they will want to teach in schools in those areas, and ensure that the classrooms are fulfilling environments so that they want to stay in

teaching. You also have to make sure that the teachers do not catch HIV, otherwise they will no longer be there. All those things are linked.

The skills that we can provide in training are, if anything, at least as important as the budget support we provide. There are many examples of that, not just in Scotland but across the UK. I am aware, for example, of medics from across Scotland who are spending time in Malawi training epilepsy nurses. Epilepsy is a huge problem in the country—a killer. That may be surprising, but it is true. There are anaesthetists from across the UK spending their vacations in Malawi and training people in anaesthetics, which again is saving lives. They are leaving the skills there and training the trainers, who then train others. That is a very productive and practical level of support.

Q49 Ms Stuart: Given that you have a moment to reflect, and to look at what is happening not just in Malawi, do you think that there are any African Governments successfully providing services on the ground to deal with HIV in their countries? Is there an African model that could be copied in Malawi?

Mr. McConnell: There are different successes in particular areas in different countries. The scale of the challenge makes a countrywide solution that is immediately and obviously successful difficult to achieve. Even in Malawi, in spite of the extent of the poverty and the lack of development, there are examples of educational and health services that are significantly improved on where they were three or four years ago. I was there a fortnight ago and could see a difference in some of the areas that I visited in May 2005. So, it is possible to demonstrate improvement, and that is true in other countries as well. The scale of the challenge is still a significant barrier to countrywide solutions making a real difference.

Q50 Mr. Hamilton: Some years ago, Malawi was notorious for its endemic corruption. How has corruption been tackled since UK aid was suspended, and has it been tackled effectively?

Mr. McConnell: The current President has been very public in his condemnation of corruption and his determination to root it out. I have never had a reason to doubt his commitment to that. He has spoken publicly about it in the UK, Malawi and elsewhere. The anti-corruption bureau is taking action against former senior politicians—one was recently sentenced to a significant jail term with hard labour. Action is definitely taking place. As ever with these issues there is a challenge for the prosecution to prove the case, but there is determination in the country to tackle the issue, not just because it is the right thing inside Malawi, but because it builds international confidence.

Q51 Mr. Hamilton: We all remember the regime of Hastings Banda and the one-party state that was once imposed upon Malawi. How deep rooted is Malawian democracy, and is there any prospect of another Hastings Banda trying to take over power?

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Mr. McConnell: There are difficulties that exist even today in Parliament as a result of the dispute over section 65 of the constitution, and the interpretation about whether Members of the Parliament can cross the Floor to another party. As I understand it, the Parliament will meet again next Monday—it has not met for some time but it will meet on Monday and discuss a number of Bills and the budget for next year. Despite that, I sense a commitment among Malawian parliamentarians to having a strong parliamentary democracy with an independent judiciary and so on. They are faced constantly with the challenge of working in that system, at the same time as dealing with the scale of poverty and the country's development challenges. They need to secure economic growth and that is presumably an issue that many sub-Saharan African countries wrestle with. The commitment to democracy is deep rooted but the capacity of the systems in Malawi needs support. The capacity of the civil service, of the judicial system, of civil society and the media—all the things that make up a strong democracy—need support.

Q52 Mr. Hamilton: Is there real freedom of speech and free media?

Mr. McConnell: I think that yes, there is freedom of speech and a free media, perhaps more than elsewhere. However, at the same time, British Government support for governance programmes there, which is mainly delivered through the high commission but partly through DFID, is very important. Even in Scotland, we were sending over parliamentary clerks to help build the capacity inside Parliament, or sending over people from the court service in Scotland to help and carry out training to build capacity in the court service in Malawi. Support for improved governance is an essential part of Britain's support for Malawi. It is accepted as something that Malawi needs and wants to see happen.

Mr. Hamilton: Thank you.

Chairman: We have a few minutes left, as we are conscious that there is a vote in about 10 minutes, so we will try and conclude before then.

Q53 Sir John Stanley: Mr. McConnell, as you know, leaving any religious considerations aside, there is an absolute correlation between the extent to which a country is impoverished, and whether or not girls and young women have educational opportunities. In a country like Malawi, the strong tendency among the great majority of families, particularly in rural areas, is that girls are sent out into the fields or made to look after the toddlers in the family home rather than sent to school. If you were in post now as High Commissioner, what would you do to help the Government give fair educational rights to girls and young women?

Mr. McConnell: The education service in Malawi faces huge challenges, partly as a result of decisions back in 1994 to provide universal free education for all primary-aged children—boys and girls—slightly ahead of most of the rest of Africa. The problem was that that legislation was not thought through and

financed, and the system could not cope. The education service has had a serious problem ever since. By and large, at primary school level, in relative terms, there is high attendance among girls as well as boys, but that changes significantly at secondary school level, partly for the reasons that you mentioned. It is also affected, for example, by sanitation and toilet facilities in schools, the lack of which is a major disincentive for girls to go to school after the age of 10 or 11. Successive Education Ministers whom I have dealt with in Malawi have mentioned that as a particular problem. It is about building not only school classrooms, but school toilets. Decent facilities would make a significant difference to the attendance of teenage girls.

In that area, perhaps my experience in education might be of use. A high commissioner would not normally be directly involved in that area, but I would certainly have a good relationship with Malawian Education Ministers and with the President, who is technically the Education Minister. I would hope that my experience could be useful to help ensure support and guidance, and perhaps also, as you say, to promote a change of culture.

Q54 Sir John Stanley: I turn to another key policy issue: at the Inter-Parliamentary Union's annual assembly, which I was able to attend last week in South Africa, President Thabo Mbeki cut an extremely isolated figure, not least after making his extraordinary public statements that there was no crisis in Zimbabwe. As you may have seen, the African nations last week were almost unanimous in asking President Mbeki to stand down as their mediator with President Mugabe, and in proposing that that role be taken on by the Zambian President. If you were in post now, what would you ask the Malawian Government to do in relation to the deeply serious crisis in Zimbabwe?

Mr. McConnell: I would ask the Malawian Government to do whatever the British Government asked me to ask them to do, I suppose. Technically, that would be my position. I am there to represent the British Government and their view would need to be passed on to the Malawian Government. In relation to the current position, both publicly and privately, the Malawian Government have made it very clear that the original election results in Zimbabwe should be properly published, and that that should have been done speedily, and the results respected. They have been quite consistent in that view.

Q55 Sir John Stanley: As you are not in post now, and therefore not corralled by Her Majesty's Government's view, what are your own views as to how we can try to restore democracy in Zimbabwe?

Mr. McConnell: I share the Foreign Secretary's view, and I suspect that it is probably shared by all parties. I have not followed exactly the debates that have taken place here on the matter. However, the Foreign Secretary said in a statement on Monday that the British Government wanted to see the original election results published and respected,

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and that we wanted African leaders in the region to exert pressure, and take on their role with confidence to ensure that the Zimbabwean Government respected the democratic process. That makes a lot of sense. I think that the more experienced leaders, as well as the emerging leaderships of the countries in the region are serious about that. The Southern African Development Community statement last week showed that they wanted the democratic process to be properly respected across all the countries of the region, including Zimbabwe. They were willing to state that clearly.

Q56 Chairman: May I ask you one final question that relates to the big change that is happening in Africa concerning the Chinese role? For many years, Malawi was one of those southern African countries—there were others—that had diplomatic relations with Taiwan. At the end of last year, it broke those relations and established links with China. I have seen a report in which the Voice of America quoted the Chinese chargé d'affaires as saying that “his office is tired of too many individuals, non-governmental organisations and government departments thronging its offices with begging bowls”. Clearly, the Chinese are now there and they have come with a large amount of potential investment. They are purchasing raw materials and providing money for Malawi. Do you see your role

as, in effect, one of ensuring that Malawi maintains its Commonwealth orientation and its historical links with this country when there are other players in the region?

Mr. McConnell: I certainly see the role of the High Commissioner as one of ensuring a continuation of Malawi’s very strong affinity and relationship not only with Scotland, but with Britain as a whole. Who the Malawian Government chose to recognise in diplomatic terms is obviously a matter for them. Britain respected Malawi’s relationship with Taiwan over the many years that that was in place, and when Malawi was one of the most outspoken supporters of Taiwanese recognition. We respect their right to change that position, as they did over the winter, and strike an agreement with the Chinese Government. I hope that whatever happens now inside Malawi is positive and productive for the Malawians, but I do not think that it will have any bearing either on our diplomatic relationship or on the friendship between the people of Malawi and the people of the UK.

Chairman: Thank you very much. We are very grateful to you for coming today, as we have found it a valuable experience. I am not sure when we will next be doing this, as it is not entirely in our hands—in that sense it is probably a bit like the start date of your appointment. We wish you all the best of luck for the future.

Mr. McConnell: Thank you. It has been a pleasure.