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The Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK’s Influence

Inquiry on

SOFT POWER AND THE UK’S INFLUENCE

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Witness: Mark Harper MP
Members present

Lord Howell of Guildford (Chairman)
Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top
Lord Forsyth of Drumlean
Lord Foulkes of Cumnock
Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots
Lord Janvrin
Baroness Morris of Bolton
Lord Ramsbotham

Examination of Witness

Mark Harper MP, Immigration Minister, Home Office

Q260  The Chairman: We have been joined now by Mark Harper, who is Immigration Minister at the Home Office. We are very grateful to him for being with us today. I have to say formally that the declared interests of this Committee are on the bits of paper in front of you. If we have a vote, which I do not think is likely, we might have to interrupt for five minutes. As you probably know, we in this Committee are seeking to formulate views and report on the deployment of so-called soft power and the promotion of Britain’s influence and attractiveness throughout the world, and hence, we hope, to fulfil our national aims of increased prosperity, an effective contribution in the outside world and security. We have had a great number of comments from many witnesses about the impact of immigration and visa policies on this issue. I shall begin with an obvious question, and please then feel free to elaborate on it. Do you feel that it is part of your job to promote the UK’s image abroad? Does that come on to your desk?

Mark Harper MP: I think it does, Chairman, and thank you for inviting me to come and give evidence. The objective of our visa and immigration policy is twofold. It is to support both our prosperity agenda—and the Home Office is just as much signed up to that as any other department—and the countervailing security agenda to stop immigration and crime and to stop people coming here who are doing so for the wrong reasons. It is about balancing the two and ensuring that we deliver on both those objectives. We have also been very clear, and the Home Secretary and I and other Ministers take every opportunity to make this point, that people wanting to come to Britain as visitors or to be here lawfully and not breach immigration rules are very welcome. We try to put service improvements in place and make it as easy as possible. To that extent, yes, it is our job to go out there and sell our message and take every opportunity, both domestically and overseas, to say that Britain is open for business and that people are very welcome here if they want to come and play by the rules.

The Chairman: But do you feel that we are getting this balance quite right? Why has witness after witness spoken about the way in which the visa policy makes this country less attractive? We have had some very strong language. Very senior journalists, editors and opinion-formers have talked about our policy being “suicidal”, which was one word that was used. Another was a “crime”. It was very strong language indeed. I do not endorse that kind of strong language in any way, but the feeling runs deep that we are striking a wrong note.
How do you feel that the case for having the right balance can be better promoted? How would you put it?

**Mark Harper MP:** I certainly think that some of those who have given evidence to you are people who philosophically do not think that we should have any visas at all. The Government’s view is that if we had no visas for anyone at all and anyone in the world could come to Britain without any control at all, that would be very damaging to us. I fundamentally do not agree with one of the journalists who said that the concept of having visas was a crime—that is a rather foolish statement. I would counter that one of the difficulties here is about the difference between reality and perception. One of the things that I ran into when I initially came into this job last year was our decision to revoke the sponsor licence of London Metropolitan University, which was absolutely the right decision to take because it was not meeting its sponsorship requirements. However, that was not necessarily reported in a very balanced way across the world. Coming into this job, I was a conscious that we do not just have to make the right decisions but that we have to think about how we communicate not just to a domestic audience but to an international one. One of the things I have tried to do over the past year is to think through some of our communications. If we think that something might be sensitive in a particular country, for example, we talk to our embassy in that country, get some advice and think about how it will play. And we do not just take decisions; we think about how they will play. A lot of the concerns that have been expressed to you are concerns that have been expressed to me, but when you actually probe the evidence it does not support them. However, it is the case that people think some of those things, and there is a gap between perception and reality. One of the reasons why I was pleased to come and give evidence was to try to deal with some of the reality versus some of the perceptions that people have.

Q261 **Baroness Morris of Bolton:** Mark, thank you very much. You mentioned the embassies, and you said that when you think something sensitive might come up you will communicate with the embassy. We all hear horror stories of fairly high-level people who do masses of business in the UK but who cannot get in, and I am sure that that would happen however perfect the system was. However, I wonder whether that could not be better mitigated. Given that our embassies know people, perhaps they could be given a way of doing the initial screening. That has been taken away now from some of our ambassadors, has it not? I wondered why that was. Perhaps it might be a good thing to bring that back.

**Mark Harper MP:** There are a couple of issues there. One is that there is a formal process where we work with UKTI to look at valuable and high-value businesses that we want to have relationships with so that we build a very good relationship with them. There is that on a formal basis. Your specific issue about the extent to which we deal with our posts abroad has been raised with me on a couple of visits, and I have asked for some work to be done to see whether we can formalise the process. Where an ambassador or a High Commissioner is aware of particular individuals who have either a business or a diplomatic relationship, although they are not a formal diplomatic person, perhaps we ought formalise their ability to feed that into the decision-making process, either to factor it into the decision or to ensure that if there is any legitimate reason why we would not want that person to come to Britain, there is a good process for handling the communication. I have asked for some work to be done on that. That is a very sensible point that has been raised with me in posts overseas.

**The Chairman:** So Minister, aside from the extremists who do not want any visa control at all, where is the aggro coming from? It really is rather strong. Is it to do with the cost of the visa, as once witness was suggesting, with the arrangements in the hinterland and the difficulties of applying for visas from some countries, or just the fact that too many people...
want to come here because they are attracted by our universities, our tourism and so on? Surely you must have a view of why the aggro is there, and therefore some targets for how to ameliorate it.

Mark Harper MP: I think it is probably worth disaggregating the two segments. On the one hand you have visit visas—that is, visas for people coming here as tourists or business visitors. I think that our performance on those is very strong. Of course many countries do not require visas to come here for those two purposes; in many countries we have non-visa nationals, and they can come to Britain for visits without getting these in advance. However, for countries where we insist on a visa in advance for good reason, our global performance is very good. We grant 89% of visas that are applied for, and in China it is even higher than that. We grant 94% of those visas within our 15 working-day target—in fact the average globally is to grant a visa in eight days—and that performance compares very well with our competitors. On that side of the shop, the tourist and business visitors, we offer a very good regime, and I think I am right in saying that over the past year that has been increasingly recognised. We have done a lot of work, for example, with partners involved in attracting Chinese business and visitors to the country, and although we have not dealt with all their complaints, we have made considerable progress. You will have seen the announcement that the Chancellor made on a recent visit about working closely with partners in China on simplifying the process for those who wish to have both a UK and a Schengen visa.

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: So why do you get proportionately so few Chinese tourists, given the increase that there has been in Chinese tourism?

Mark Harper MP: We have had very significant growth. In the past quarter, for example, we have had 150,000 applications, an increase of 40%. Our overall performance is very strong. It depends on the numbers that you are looking at. The numbers that are often quoted are simply not sustainable. The idea that France gets seven and a half times more visitors than we do, which I have seen quoted, is simply not supported by the evidence. They issue broadly the same number of Schengen visas that we do, while the exit data from China, where they ask people exiting China which country they are going to, suggest that we get a broadly similar number of visitors. That huge disparity is just not supported by the evidence. There is some tourism survey data, which are often used but are not particularly robust or arrived at with good methodology. The data suggest that we are actually performing very well and seeing strong growth in Chinese students, Chinese business visitors and tourists. That does not mean that there is not more to do. There is. I have met the retail sector and representatives of Chinese businesses in both the finance sector and the manufacturing sector in order to talk through some of the things that we can do to solve some of the second-order problems. The feedback is that we have a pretty good visa system both for visit visas and for work and study.

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: We are in a parallel universe, then.

Mark Harper MP: Well, there is a difference between what you sometimes read in the newspapers, the “death by anecdote” story—

Q262 Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: We are just talking about the evidence that we have had from a range of people, not just from newspapers—I do not think that I have heard the extreme language that the Chairman was talking about. There is hardly a single witness who has not talked about a visa problem.

Mark Harper MP: But can you suggest for me what the problem is, though—a factual problem as opposed to someone’s assertion?
Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: What are the numbers of Chinese tourists and businessmen going around the world, and what percentage of them actually come to Britain?

Mark Harper MP: Let me run through what I have in front of me because I am not going to make numbers up. If I do not have some of the figures, obviously I will write to the Committee. Our visa service in China had 300,000 visa applications and granted 96% of them, so 96% of Chinese people who apply for a visit visa get one. We saw a 22% growth in numbers between August 2012 and July 2013, 40% in the past quarter. Our average processing time is less than seven days.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: May I just stop you there? How many Chinese people are travelling as tourists? Is it not tens of millions?

Mark Harper MP: It is.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: Is 300,000 not rather a small proportion?

Mark Harper MP: No, because the overwhelming majority of Chinese who travel overseas do not go further than Hong Kong or Macau. If you look at the exit data from China, a significant proportion of people travel to Hong Kong and Macau and another significant proportion to Asia. If you look at those who travel further afield, the number of visitors who come to the United Kingdom is broadly comparable to those who come to similar-sized European countries. There is not a massive disparity.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: Could you let us have the actual numbers?

Mark Harper MP: Let me write to you with those particular exit data, and I shall set out to you our view of the comparative data.

Q263 The Chairman: Perhaps we had better go straight on to the Schengen issue and the ameliorations that have been suggested. Can you explain to us what those are and how they are going to affect things?

Mark Harper MP: Yes, there are a number of things that we have done in China to speed up the overall process. We have more visa application centres than any other European country. We have also looked at some of our premium services, to pick up Baroness Morris’s point, for some of those high-end customers. We have had success recently with some very significant investments in the UK where we delivered a very high level of customer service to some very significant business visitors, which got some very positive feedback. The specific issue that the Chancellor announced on his visit was around making the process much more straightforward for someone who wants to apply for a Schengen visa and a UK one; we will allow them to apply on a single Schengen form with a very small extra amount of UK information. We now allow a passport pass-back process where they can effectively get their visas at the same time, and we are working with some commercial partners in China so that from the customer’s point of view it will be a relatively seamless process to make one application and then receive a visa for both the United Kingdom and the Schengen countries. That is what we are working on at the moment with commercial partners, and we are hoping to have something rolled out next year.

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: And will that extend beyond China?

Mark Harper MP: That is what we are aiming for at the moment because that is where the specific issue has been raised. Clearly, anything that we roll out in one country we look at rolling out elsewhere. For example, we are planning to roll out the one-day service that the Prime Minister announced on his visit to India earlier this year, which has been very successful, in China and a number of our other high-growth markets across the world.
When we try things in various locations and they work, we look at rolling them out to our high-growth markets across the world.

**Lord Ramsbotham:** To follow up what you just said, you have told us about your great success but it is not just journalists who have complained; universities, businesses and indeed everyone who has come here has complained about the visa process—the bureaucracy, the time, the cost and just the image that it gives all make it difficult. You have talked about your success, but they would not say this to us unless they had concrete evidence of the opposite. I have always had a suspicion about the UK Border Agency as an organisation that what it says is not actually always what it does. I am not just being critical about this, but it is hugely important that we should have the image right.

**Mark Harper MP:** No, I agree with you. I found this disconnect rather frustrating when I started to do this job. It is absolutely true that lots of people say lots of unhelpful things, but when you meet them and challenge them on the evidence, they do not have the facts to support their assertions. The point that I have made to some of them when I have had this conversation with education providers and universities is that when they have said publicly that everything is dreadful, they then sound surprised that people have listened to the fact that they said that everything was dreadful and think that it is, when the evidence is that it actually is not, and that is not helpful. Our visa performance for visit visas is actually very competitive globally, and you can find people who compare and contrast that. We have seen an increase in the number of students coming to universities. We have seen an overall fall in the number of visas issued to students because we have taken nearly 700 sponsors off the register, as there was significant abuse, but we have seen growth in the number of students coming to universities. We have seen very strong growth from particular countries, such as China. Over the past year we have made significant strides in working with universities in what they call a partnership approach, where the relationship between us and the university sector has improved hugely. I have met Universities UK, the Russell Group and a number of others to work on some improvements to the performance. I think they would agree that we have seen an improvement over the past year in the way we have worked with them. We have delivered some changes to the policies, and I think we have made a significant improvement in the way we deal with students coming to the UK. This is an area where I always like to focus on the facts. I am not disagreeing with you—I know what the evidence to the Committee has been because I have heard a lot of it myself—but when you actually unpick it and challenge people on the assertions that they have made, the evidence does not always back up what they are saying. I am not saying that we are perfect—of course we are not; there is a lot of room for improvement—but some of the things that people assert are simply not true, or the assertions are not backed up by hard evidence. If there are facts that people can point out, I am happy to improve them, but we have to deal with facts and evidence, not just perceptions.

**Lord Ramsbotham:** Given that they have come to us, obviously hoping that we will help to improve things, I think it is important that we resolve this before our report is published.

**The Chairman:** Sorry, there is a long queue of people wanting to speak. We must take turns. Have you finished, Lord Ramsbotham?

**Lord Ramsbotham:** Absolutely.

Q264 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** Minister, you have asked four times for facts. Why do people in Lesotho have to go to Pretoria to get visas?
**Mark Harper MP:** In most countries we have visa application centres. There are some countries where we do not have a visa application centre, and people have to come to register their biometrics before we allow them to come to the United Kingdom.

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** Why do people in Caribbean countries all have to go to a central point? I could go through country after country where you have to travel miles. Sometimes you have to fly from one island to another to get a visa, or go by horseback, because our embassies do not all issue them.

**Mark Harper MP:** It is a balance between the cost of running the operation—

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** But you said you did not know of any problems. You said you did not know of any examples. I have given you some.

**Mark Harper MP:** If we start from the proposition that there are some countries where we have a visa requirement, which we have for good reason, then clearly we have to run that in an efficient manner. It is not possible for us to have a visa application centre where someone can give their biometrics in every single town and village of every single country, so there is a balance and we look at the volume of applications—

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** I am not saying that they should be in every town and village.

**Mark Harper MP:** We look at the number of applications and locate those visa application centres. We have a bigger network of those than many other countries.

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** With respect, you are not helping the Committee. The Committee is trying to find ways to improve the situation. We are explaining all the problems. One of the ways of improving it would be to give European Union posts a consular responsibility to issue visas. That is quite possible, but the Government are setting their face against it. Why? That would improve the situation.

**Mark Harper MP:** Do you mean that we should allow the European Union posts to make decisions about who we issue visas to?

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** No, to deal with application procedures. Do you ever go abroad and see what is actually happening on the ground?

**Mark Harper MP:** I do. I go to our visa posts on a number of occasions. We are certainly open to working in partnership with our European partners for visa application centres. One of the things that we are looking at in China, for example, is whether there is some mutual benefit in working with our European partners on sharing some commercial partners.

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** To be honest, I am not so worried about China as some of my colleagues are. I am worried about some of the developing countries, like Lesotho, some of the Caribbean countries, some of the Asian countries or some of the other African countries where, in order to get a visa, they have to travel miles or even into other countries. I think you ought to go out and have a look at it. I did in Lesotho. That was a good example. I travelled with the Deputy High Commissioner, who took the machine all the way from Pretoria to issue visas. That was a positive thing, the kind of thing that we should be encouraging, but you are not—you are always defending the status quo.

**The Chairman:** We want to move on. Just one question on this, en passant: do you consult your opposite numbers at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about this problem, which is obviously theirs as much as yours?

**Mark Harper MP:** I do. I have frequent meetings with colleagues from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, both formal and unofficial. If I pick up concerns from countries, I
pass them back to colleagues and we have a discussion about them to see whether there are improvements that can be made.

**Q265 Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** Have you had an opportunity to look at the UK China Visa Alliance’s written evidence to the Committee?

**Mark Harper MP:** I have.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** That has some numbers in it. Can I just remind you of what they are? It said in its evidence to us that France attracts up to seven and a half times more Chinese visitors than Britain, that the Home Office’s figures show that the maximum number of Chinese visitors to the UK in 2011-12 was 210,400, and that in the same period the Schengen area issued 1.185 million visas—six times more. It pointed out that visitors with a Schengen visa can visit any of the 26 member states in Europe, and that only 85% of those Chinese tourists coming to Europe apply for a British visa, and therefore we lose out. You said in answer to an earlier question that the bulk of the Chinese tourists are going to Hong Kong and the others to Asia, but those who are going to Europe visit more than one country. The Chancellor’s initiative is very welcome, whereby there will be some arrangements through selected travel agents, but do you agree with these numbers that were included in the evidence or not?

**Mark Harper MP:** We do not agree with the number that seven and a half times more Chinese visitors go to France than in the UK. That is simply not supported either by the number of visas issued or by the Chinese exit data.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** You mean Schengen visas?

**Mark Harper MP:** Yes.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** But Schengen visas enable people to travel to any country in Europe.

**Mark Harper MP:** But just because they are able to do so does not mean that they do. There is no hard evidence that that is what they do at all.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** Some 1.185 million Schengen visas are issued, as against 210,000 for the UK.

**Mark Harper MP:** Yes, but that is 1.1 million Schengen visas spread over all the countries in the European Union, not just one or two of them.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** But you can visit 26 member states with a Schengen visa.

**Mark Harper MP:** Yes, but if you compare us to comparable countries, the numbers are not significant. If you look at the number of Chinese visitors who go to France, that is not significantly different from the number of visitors who come to United Kingdom.

**Q266 Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** The evidence we were given was that if you have a Schengen visa you can visit 26 European countries—there are a lot more of them. If you want to visit France and Germany, you can do that. The evidence also said that most visitors travelled to more than one country, having travelled half way around the world, but if they want to come to Britain they have to apply for a separate visa, and only 85% of the cohort of people who get as far as Europe do so. We are therefore losing out. Do you agree with that?

**Mark Harper MP:** We agree that it would be better if more people could apply for both. That is exactly why we have put in place the process that is under way that will make it
easier for people to apply for both a UK and a Schengen visa. However, we do not agree 
with the statistic that suggests that the difference is of an order of magnitude of seven and a 
half times. I have heard that statistic before; when we ourselves have had a debate with the 
UK China Visa Alliance, it has put that number to us and we have said that we do not think 
it is supported by the evidence. Clearly, if you take the whole of the number of countries in 
the rest of the European Union that are in Schengen, which is a significantly larger number of 
people than the United Kingdom, it is not a fair comparison to ask whether more people go 
to that group of countries than come to the United Kingdom.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** It is not an argument about fairness; it is about people having 
the ability to come to Britain as easily as they can go to other European countries.

**Mark Harper MP:** Correct, and we can be compared to comparably sized European 
countries. For example, the number of Chinese visitors who go to France is not significantly 
different from the number of Chinese visitors who come to the United Kingdom, which 
does not suggest that there is any massive disadvantage in the fact that we are not in 
Schengen.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** How do we compare with Belgium?

**Mark Harper MP:** I do not know because I have the France numbers in front of me.

**The Chairman:** If you are Chinese with the wonderful prospect of travelling to Europe and 
you are applying for a visa, is it more difficult to apply for one of ours than it is to apply for 
one—a Schengen visa, of course—to France or Germany? Is the administrative form-filling 
more formidable for us, or is it just about the same?

**Mark Harper MP:** No, it is not. It is about the same. One of the things that we have done 
is change some of our requirements over the last year. We have made it simpler and more 
straightforward in the number of documents that we ask for and in the length of the form, 
so actually it is not more complicated at all. In fact, we have made the process more 
comparable, which makes it possible for us now to make the system effectively seamless for 
people to apply for both together. That is what we are working on at the moment.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** Do you agree that only 6% do apply for both together?

**Mark Harper MP:** Apparently that is the number, yes.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** Given the attraction of London and the reputation of Britain, 
if you have come to Europe, does not the fact that only 6% apply suggest to you that there is 
a big hole?

**Mark Harper MP:** It would clearly be advantageous if more people came here. What we 
are really interested in is the number of people who come here and what they spend when 
they are here. Of course the tourists who come to just the United Kingdom stay here for 
the whole of their trip. The danger if we have to work it both ways is that we might get 
some extra visitors who come here for a short period as part of a wider European tour, but 
the flipside is that those who come here for the whole of their visit might not stay here for 
very long and might go to other European countries as well. So there is a downside to this, 
but it would be helpful if people applied for both visas, which is why we are putting in place 
the process which the Chancellor announced on his visit.

**Q267  Lord Janvrin:** You said right at the beginning that there is a reality perception 
problem, which is patently obvious from the line of questioning. What are you doing about 
the perception problem? Are you running a major communications campaign? How does it
relate to the GREAT campaign that we have heard a lot of? We keep being told that there is a disconnect within government here.

**Mark Harper MP:** There are two things. First, the Home Office is very much involved in the GREAT campaign, and we have co-ordinated our messaging. For example, we have put some extra communications resource in place in China, and we are using our marketing and communications as part of the GREAT campaign. Our stuff is branded in the same way, and we are working closely with other government departments to have consistent messaging. We do not have separate messaging; we have messaging that is consistent as part of the GREAT campaign.

The second part of the approach is to work with organisations in the UK that do some of the communications. Since I have been doing this job I have had a lot of contact with the university sector, with the retail sector as I said, with the business sector and with various groups focused on specific countries to deal with some of the real problems and with some of the perceived problems, so that we can communicate.

Let me give you an example on universities. I think it is fair to say that we did a better job of communicating the end of the previous post-study work arrangements than we did communicating what are very good arrangements that replace them. If you are a university student in Britain and you are a graduate, it is actually very straightforward to stay here. If you have a graduate-level job paying just over £20,000 a year, you can stay in the United Kingdom. I do not think that we necessarily landed that argument well enough. I think we did a very good job of communicating the change to the previous regime, but I do not think we did a good enough job at communicating this. We have worked with the university sector and large employers at improving the way in which we communicate that. That was a particular issue in India, for example. Many students come from India and want or need to be able to work afterwards. We have seen a significant growth in the most recent UCAS numbers—a 12% increase—in the number of Indian applications, so I think we are starting to get that message over, but that is a good example of where we perhaps did not communicate that we had changed the approach and people went away with the idea that it was more difficult to stay in Britain to work post-university study, which of course is not the case.

**Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top:** There are other reasons for people to come to this country than to spend money. I know that we want them to, but there are other reasons. I recently did some work with the Tanzanian parliament, and there was great anger there because they felt that Britain did not really want to know them because they have to go to Nairobi for their visas. I have also done some work in Kenya, and there again they are looking much more to other models because they think that the British Commonwealth has lost what it means to them, and a lot of that talk is about visas. If this is about perception, do you see any of your role as doing work with Commonwealth countries on our mutual responsibility and so on? Soft power is about influence. You get influence partly through trade but partly through other things. We are about to have the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference. That will not be an easy conference. Does the Home Office see any of its role as supporting the Commonwealth and its aims and objectives, or does it see that as having nothing to do with visas?

**Mark Harper MP:** I think we do see ourselves as part of the Government’s joined-up approach. We have been involved in the discussions running up to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. There are some discussions on the agenda about visas, and we have been involved in that process. We clearly have to balance both the reason why we have visas—there are security challenges in immigration and asylum and so forth—with our
absolute focus on the prosperity agenda as well and making sure that people come here to trade and on reputation as well. Where we have real issues, we absolutely want to deal with them, and we have to balance those objectives. If we have real issues that people are raising with us, we absolutely see it as our role to deal with those, and we take the meetings with Commonwealth partners very seriously. I have met a number of High Commissioners and members of their Governments since I have had this role, and I will continue to do so.

**The Chairman:** Has the issue of distinct treatment for categories of Commonwealth visitors ever been discussed, or, more narrowly, has the issue been discussed of a special kind of treatment for those who are actually subjects of Her Majesty the Queen: that is, citizens of the 16 realms in the Commonwealth that come under our monarchy?

**Mark Harper MP:** Not as a class, no, but we look at our visa requirements for visit visas on the basis of things that I have set out. We judge those country by country rather than as a class.

**Q268 Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots:** Just by way of introduction, you said that communication was very important, and I suspect that your issue about post-study work options needs communicating closer to home, because unless I completely misunderstood what was said to us an hour ago, we were told that the post-study work option system was not working well and was a major disincentive. My question relates to the quality of the experience for students. It seems to me that our soft power does very well if it is good but very poorly if it is poor. Quite a lot of the Universities UK research that it has done on domestic undergraduates is completely at odds with the anecdotal evidence that you get from talking to students about the quality of the experience that they have. Do the Government look at, consider and see whether we are getting the right values, the right experience, the right life for people when they come here for three years or for whatever period they come for as students from overseas?

**Mark Harper MP:** I do not think that we commission specific research. We have a dialogue with Universities UK, we talk to them about the experience of students, and we look at the feedback that we get from other organisations, but I do not think that we have gone out and done any ourselves formally. I will check that point and write to the Committee. Clearly we want the experience of applying for the visa and the experience that they get at the border when they arrive to be good, and we have put a lot of effort into making sure that we deliver a good experience at the ports. We have made a huge improvement compared with where we were last year in driving down queuing. We now process 99.6% of passengers through our airports within our service standards, which is not the position we were in last year before the Olympic and Paralympic Games. We have put a lot of work into that and into their experience when they are here. I think we are focused on that and we want them to have a good experience. We want them to be able to stay here. For students who want to say here to work in a graduate-level job and to start their own business, we have some schemes now for graduate entrepreneurs so that they can stay, and we want to expand those. We want students who have bright ideas and want to run businesses, to grow them and to employ people, and we want them to stay in the United Kingdom rather than go elsewhere.

**Q269 Baroness Morris of Bolton:** Thank you very much. That is really good news on the graduate entrepreneurs. On the graduate-level jobs, I heard a story the other day about a very talented young woman who had graduated and gone to one of the top law firms. She had gone into a job where she was being paid over £30,000 a year, but it was not classed as a graduate-level job because of the structure within that firm, and therefore she could not
stay. I obviously realise that there has to be a benchmark, but I just wonder whether there is room for common-sense application to individuals. It seems to me that when you have a very rigid scheme, very talented people could slip through for a whole host of reasons.

**Mark Harper MP:** We keep that sort of thing under review. The Migration Advisory Committee looks at a lot of detailed work on, for example, occupations where there are shortages and where employers do not have to do a resident labour market test, and we look at a lot of that sort of information at a very detailed level. It sounds to me as though we need to go away and look at the detail of that example, because it seems to me that a job that is paying a woman £30,000 a year pretty much is a graduate-level job. If you have the specifics of that, I will happily take that away.

**Baroness Morris of Bolton:** I will try to remember who told me.

**Mark Harper MP:** But yes, we do need to be sensible. I know that you were given evidence earlier, but there is a balance here between not changing the rules every five minutes and reflecting where people think there are problems. Three years ago when we changed the routes for working, for study and for families to the United Kingdom, that was clearly a big change in our approach. We have tried to keep the broad approach consistent since then, but we do of course want to change the rules in detail where specific issues are flagged up. There is always a balance here between consistency and not changing the rules but responding to genuine issues that are raised with us. Each time the rules have been changed since I have been doing this job, we have made changes to reflect feedback from universities and businesses, and we have made some tweaks to the rules on the length of time people can stay here for and on some of the language abilities to try to fit better with the requirements. So it is a balance between consistency and reflecting change where change is required.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** Can I just ask you about the front window for Britain when people arrive at the ports, the airports or wherever? I think you said that you were meeting 98.6%—

**Mark Harper MP:** 99.6%.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** —99.6% of your standards. I will spare you the anecdotal stories of waiting in queues at Edinburgh and London airports to get into the country as an EU citizen. Are you satisfied with these standards? My impression, certainly, travelling around the world is that in Asia the airports are just so efficient. In the UK, the process of getting through immigration or security is so much more of a hassle. Even within the UK, you have different standards. Some require you to take your laptops out and put them through security, others do not. Given the areas of responsibility that you have for immigration—and, I think, for security, although that might be another department—are you satisfied that we are as good as we should be in the way we greet people when they arrive or leave this country, because it is very, very evident that we are way behind the curve compared with many, many other countries round the world?

**Mark Harper MP:** I will not question your point about how we compare with others. Are we as good as we should be? Probably not. There are clearly different areas of responsibility, though. On the issue of security, which is led by the Department for Transport, there are responsibilities that airports have to deliver. That is one of the challenges for us: having a good relationship with the airport operator and having a joined-up approach. Let me give you an example. What passengers are really interested in is how quickly they can get off the plane and get out of the airport.
Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: Exactly.

Mark Harper MP: That means joining up the processes. Last year during the Olympic and Paralympic Games, we put a huge amount of resource into processing people very quickly at one of our airports. All that happened then was they backed up in the baggage hall and did not leave the airport any quicker. So we have to work with airports on delivering a good service. We had challenges during the summer with some airports simply not being big enough to deal with the volume of passengers at peak time. For example, at some airports when we have a student surge and a significant number of students arrive, we fully staff every desk that is at the airport but the airport is simply not large enough to deal with that peak. I am confident that we are doing what we can, but there is a limit to what we at the Home Office can do to improve that experience.

Q270 Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: Minister, could I suggest that you take a day off and arrive unannounced? It is certainly not my experience that when you arrive at the airport, every desk is occupied and there are no queues. It may be that I am just very unlucky, but the anecdotal evidence—I know you have statistical evidence—simply belies that. The story that one hears from businessmen and others is that you throw in particular is just one of the worst places, and that increasingly people are looking to Schipol and other airports because of that experience.

Mark Harper MP: I can assure you that when I travel I do not say who I am. I go through the normal process; I am not sufficiently senior to get whizzed through the VIP bits of airports, so I see what it looks like from the customer’s end. I have to say that my experience has often been very positive. I have been dying to spot a problem and be able to wander up and suggest that it be fixed, but I have yet to find one. In terms of evidence, take Heathrow: we had some issues there when I started this job. It was off the back of the Olympics. The relationship was not as good as it could have been but it is much better now. Heathrow is very pleased with our performance, and that is not just our statistical evidence—if you look at the work that Heathrow does in surveying its customers about their perception of their experience, the immigration bit of the journey through the airport is actually now rated as pretty good.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: How long do you have to wait to be rated as pretty good?

Mark Harper MP: That is about what the customers’ perception is. Our service standards—I will give you a rough idea but I will write to the Committee with the exact numbers—is that the service level for an EEA passenger is that they wait for no longer than 25 minutes, and for a non-EEA passenger it is 45 minutes. However, the average waiting times for EEA passengers, for example, are below 10 minutes. However, I will write to the Committee with the facts and the average data, particularly for Heathrow.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: And would you be able to provide us with data on what other countries are able to achieve in that respect?

Mark Harper MP: I may be able to if they are published. I do not have them if they are not, but there may be some published data. I will look for you. However, I will certainly give you the data that we have for Heathrow on what our performance is. I think it is now a lot better than it was; we have put a lot of effort into it and recruited extra border force officers. Our relationship with the major airports is very good, and we want to work with them in partnership to welcome more people to Britain. So we have been working closely with Heathrow and Gatwick, putting in place more e-gates for EEA passengers, for example, so you do not have to wait for a border force officer. We have just launched our registered
passenger scheme to replace the IRIS technology, which is now out of date, for regular non-EEA travellers to Britain, who will now be able to use the EEA process and gates to get a faster customer experience. We are also working with airlines on a strengthened fast-track process for their most valued customers.

Q271  Lord Janvrin: Can I come back to students, particularly the bogus student visas? Has that been dealt with successfully, in your view? If so, do you feel that there has been any knock-on effect on genuine student applications because of what you have had to do to clamp down on the bogus ones?

Mark Harper MP: We now have just under 700 fewer sponsors on the sponsor register, so that is partly where we have declined someone’s application and partly where they have chosen not to reapply. That has meant that the overall number of students has gone down. When we looked at the evidence, the risk was in the privately funded colleges. Publicly funded FE colleges were less of a risk and universities were a very low risk, so we have prioritised universities in our arrangements and we have seen quite strong growth in the numbers coming to our universities. That is what we want to continue doing. We have worked closely with universities on specific issues regarding them, and we have a good process now. They are keen that we do not make significant changes. They feel that the process works and they want to work with us on what is called a co-regulation approach, where we can raise issues with each other and deal with particular day to day issues that they have. I think that they are broadly content with where policy is and do not want to see any radical changes to it.

The Chairman: Do you think, Minister—we are coming to the end; we have kept you here for almost an hour—that the high mood of the Olympics last year has been somewhat tarnished since then by the continuous commentary on our visa restrictions, or is that unfair?

Mark Harper MP: I am not quite sure. This is a difficult issue. Ministers always take care, even when we are talking about some of the tough decisions that we have to take when dealing with abuse, to put it in the context of welcoming people to Britain who are coming here for the right reasons. We have those balanced messages but they do not always get reported. We cannot always control that, even though we try extremely hard. Some of the commentary is not helpful. I have commented to the university sector, for example, that if they think there are genuine issues, they should please raise them with us privately, and we will see whether we can resolve them. If, having raised them with us privately, they feel that we have ignored them or not taken any notice, they should feel free to criticise us, but it is not very helpful if the first place you go for criticism is to have a dialogue in the pages of newspapers or on television, because that is a self-fulfilling prophecy for bad news. I think that we now have some of those organisations in a better place where they feel that we have a better relationship and can have some of those discussions privately and be more joined up on having a very positive message for the outside world’s consumption. We have made some progress there. Do I know what it looks like overall? No, I do not have a very good sense of what the overall view is as perceived by, if you like, the audience. There are certainly some areas where there have been unfortunate messages overseas in reporting. As I said, the London Metropolitan case was one where in retrospect we could have thought a little more carefully about the impact on the students and how that might be perceived. But I think that we have learnt from that and if we ever have to do it again we will deal with the students in a way that will help international perception. There are some learnings for us there.
**Q272 The Chairman:** This is really the final question, which we have already heard about in this Committee in the previous session earlier today. Would dealing with the student issue in a more sensitive and attractive way include taking the student sector out of the total immigration figures, an idea that has been put forward by some?

**Mark Harper MP:** There are two issues here. First of all, I think that that argument started because people thought that if we did not count the numbers we would somehow have a different policy. However, because we have now managed to persuade people that the policy is actually fairly good—if you get your place in university, you can speak English and you can pay the fees, you can come here; it is not actually that hard—I think that people see that there would not be a different policy whether or not you count the numbers. The second is that it is a fact that students who come to Britain for more than a year are migrants. They have an impact on public services and are no more or less migrants than people who come here to work, for example. We should count them; our overseas competitors all do.

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** But 98% of them go back after they have finished their course. We heard that evidence earlier on.

**Mark Harper MP:** I am afraid I do not know where that evidence has come from. It is not entirely true. The most recent evidence from the Office for National Statistics, which has just started asking people who are here when they leave—the previous set of statistics was the first one—showed a much lower number of students leaving than you might have expected based on the number who arrived three or four years ago, so I am not sure that that is right. I am not disagreeing with you that that is the evidence that you have been given, but I do not know what the basis is for asserting that 90% of the students who come to Britain leave.

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** What is the percentage that go back?

**Mark Harper MP:** The honest answer is that we do not know, and neither do the universities. That is one reason why we have asked the ONS to improve the data on tracking people who leave the UK and seeing how many students leave, and it is doing so.

**Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** If you do not know, how do you know you have a problem?

**Mark Harper MP:** The evidence that the ONS has published this year suggests that it is nowhere near that number of students who leave. However, we do not have brilliant data and we need to improve them. The ONS is now starting to collect those data, which will give us a better picture, but the universities do not have very good data either. The point is that our overseas competitors count students as migrants. The definition of a migrant, as you know—

**Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top:** Who does?

**Mark Harper MP:** They all do. All our competitors count—

**The Chairman:** Including America?

**Mark Harper MP:** Yes, they do, they count them as migrants. The definition of a migrant is someone who changes their place of residence for more than a year, and that is why all our overseas competitors count students as migrants in their statistics.

**Q273 The Chairman:** One final, final question, Minister, as we are a Committee concerned with the deployment of soft power and influence abroad: do you and your department get together and consider the impact of the policies being pursued before
trailing or developing them? Obviously we have in mind the “Go Home” vans, which did not make a tremendously good international impression.

**Mark Harper MP**: We do think about the impact of them, yes. That particular one was a very clear message aimed at people who were in the UK illegally. I do not think asking people who are here illegally to return to their country of origin is an unhelpful message at all. It sends a message that if you want to come to Britain, obey our rules and follow our laws, you are incredibly welcome, but you are not welcome here if you are going to break our rules. I think that is a very good message, but the Home Secretary and I made it clear that the results of the pilot were not as successful as one would have hoped and we will not be repeating that aspect of it. It is worth saying, of course, that the rest of the pilot, which involved advertisements and surgeries working with community groups, was actually quite successful, more successful than the advertising, and those parts of the work will continue. We have published all that information, and I think that there is a copy in the Libraries of both Houses.

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock**: I was tempted, Chair, to ask the Minister whether he is enjoying his current job more than trying to reform the House of Lords, but I thought you would rule that out of order so I will not.

**The Chairman**: Completely out of order but noted. Judging by the smile on the Minister’s face, he obviously finds this much easier. Minister, for an hour you have answered our questions very robustly. Like many, you have the most ministerial task of balance. In a sense, you walk a tightrope and you have to do so with great skill, which I have to say you have done during this session. We are very grateful to you and have learnt from you, and maybe you have a sense of our concerns in this Committee as well. Thank you very much indeed.