

Statement to Parliament: Minister Duncan statement on US State Visit petitions

Thank you, Mr Turner. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

In response to the two petitions which have triggered this debate, and having listened to the arguments of both sides, I would like to set out the position of Her Majesty's Government, and explain the thinking behind it.

The State Visit as people have mentioned is a uniquely British construct. No other country is able to offer a State Visit in quite the same way as we do. It is distinctively British.

Over the course of her reign, Her Majesty has hosted over 100 of them. All such visits are a rare and prestigious occasion. But they are also our most powerful diplomatic tool. They enable us to strengthen and influence those international relationships that are of the greatest strategic importance to this country, and even much more widely to other parts of the world as well. In answer to the Honourable lady who speaks for the front bench, the opposition, recommendations for state visits are made on the advice of government through the Royal Visits Committee, not by parliament as such. That committee is attended by representatives of the Royal Household, Downing Street, the Cabinet Office, the Department for Trade and is chaired by the Foreign Office.

In an uncertain and increasingly dangerous world, the ability to work closely with key countries is of critical importance. Strong alliances and close relationships are a central stabilising pillar for world security.

This is an increasingly unstable world. Yet always within that world, and throughout modern history, the United States and the United Kingdom have worked together, side by side, to bring peace and security during times of danger and uncertainty. Especially with the world as it is today, that is why a State Visit matters so much. Put simply, diplomacy matters.

The relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States is built around a common language, the common principles of freedom and democracy, and common interests in so many other areas besides.

Our relationship is undoubtedly special. On security, on defence, on trade, on investment, on all of these issues, the United Kingdom and the United States are, and will remain, the closest of partners.

The US is the world's greatest power, and in the light of America's absolutely pivotal role, we believe it is entirely right that we should use all the tools at our disposal to build common ground with President Trump.

As the baton of office passed seamlessly, constitutionally, from one

President to another, we were already well placed to have a productive and meaningful engagement with the wider new Administration. The British Embassy in Washington has been working with key administration figures over many months. British Secretaries of State have built relationships with their opposite numbers following their Congressional confirmation process.

The Prime Minister's visit last month was of enormous significance. The Foreign and Defence Secretaries met their opposite numbers only last week and on Friday I met Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly.

This Government places our national interest at the heart of our government's decision-making, and the Special Relationship is a central part of that national interest. It is a relationship which transcends political parties on both sides of the Atlantic and it is bigger than individual personalities. It is about the security and prosperity of our two nations.

Mr Turner, The Prime Minister's meeting with President Trump in Washington last month identified many areas of common interest where we will work with the new Administration. A State Visit will provide the opportunity to advance these common interests further.

In respect of timing, which has been mentioned in this debate, State Visits are not necessarily the sole preserve of long-serving Heads of State. In the past a State Visit has been extended to the Presidents of South Africa, France, South Korea, Finland and Poland, amongst others, each within their first year of office.

The Government strongly believes that it is a perfectly legitimate decision to use the full impact of an invitation to maximise the diplomatic significance of a State Visit at the start of President Trump's term of office. Both President Obama and President George W Bush visited the UK on a State Visit during their first term in office, so it is entirely appropriate that President Trump should be invited in his first term too.

But let me be also be clear: neither the precise timing nor the content of the proposed visit have yet been agreed.

Mention has been made of the prospect of the President addressing Parliament in some manner or other. The fact is, on only three occasions in the past century has the guest addressed both Houses of Parliament as part of their State Visit: President de Gaulle in 1960, President Mandela in 1996 and President Obama in 2011.

But in any event, Mr Chairman, as the House and you are both aware, whether this ever happens is an issue solely for the relevant Parliamentary authorities to determine. Comment on whether or not this might happen has, on this occasion, completely run ahead of itself.

Because the simple fact is that no request has ever been received from Washington for any Parliamentary event to take place. The question of perhaps addressing a meeting of Parliament has never even been mentioned. Therefore, Mr Turner, any discussion or judgement about this possibility is purely

speculative.

But within the views that have been expressed about the appropriateness of a State Visit for the President there lurks too, I would argue, a fundamental principle that Members of this House should consider very seriously. It is the principle of freedom of speech.

President Trump was democratically elected by the American people under their own constitutional system. To have strong views about him is one matter: but to translate a difference of opinion into a demand to ban him is quite another.

Given the understandable questions on certain policy stances which arise with any change of government, it is prudent for us to work closely alongside the United States as the new administration charts its course. And already we see the importance of that engagement with the Prime Minister's early meeting with the President eliciting key commitments on NATO, echoed by the Vice President in Munich on Saturday, and laying the groundwork to establish a swift post-Brexit free trade agreement. Mr Turner, in February 1917, a century ago, the Spectator magazine published its view on the US and the UK. It read:

It would be easy to write down a hundred reasons why unclouded friendship and moral co-operation between the United States and Britain are a benefit to the world, and why an interruption of such relations is a detriment to progress and a disease worldwide in its effects.

It went on:

But when we had written down all those reasons we should not have expressed the instinctive sentiments which go below and beyond them all. To our way of feeling, quarrelling and misunderstandings between the British and American peoples are like a thing contrary to Nature.

They are so contrary to Nature that the times of misunderstanding have always seemed to us abnormal, and a return to friendship not an achievement of wise diplomacy but merely a resumption of the normal.

It is that historic normality that is reflected in this invitation. This is a special moment for the Special Relationship.

Mr Turner, the visit should happen. The visit will happen. And when it does, I trust that the entire United Kingdom will extend a polite and generous welcome to President Donald Trump.