



Sir Mark Sedwill, Acting Cabinet Secretary and National Security Adviser

5 October 2018, Institute for Government

The Public Chairs' Forum welcomed Sir Mark Sedwill, Acting Cabinet Secretary and National Security Adviser to discuss the current priorities within government and to give members the opportunity to raise any issues of relevance to Arms'-Length Bodies.



Sir Mark opened the seminar by emphasising how pleased he was to engage with the Forum and passed on best wishes from Sir Jeremy Heywood.

EU exit continues to be the priority in Government. Sir Mark explained that there remains a good chance of a deal being secured, and one which is in the interests of the EU both in terms of goods and services as well as global security.

Sir Mark acknowledged the parliamentary challenges ahead. Once the Meaningful Vote is passed, Parliament will have to introduce the EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill swiftly to ensure Royal Assent by 29 March 2019; the next six months are likely to be intense. The next challenge will be how the UK negotiates the implementation phase and future relationship. The pages within the 'political declaration' document will need to be transposed into lengthy legal text, and the timetable will be further affected by the European elections in June and the appointment of a new Commission, which would not be in place until the autumn 2019.

In the event that a deal is not secured, Sir Mark anticipated that Europe and the UK would be able to establish a good relationship against the wider backdrop of global uncertainty. He touched on US/China relations, challenges with Russia and the ongoing terrorist threat. He noted the domestic impact of these global events, which is being facilitated by the advancement of technology and globalisation.

These issues presented challenges and opportunities for leaders to navigate. Indeed as leaders of public bodies on the frontline of delivering government policy, Sir Mark invited Chairs to share their views on how to address these trends. The Government will need Chairs' help to move towards a 21st century vision for the country. He also reminded attendees that for a successful Brexit, the UK will need to strengthen trading relationships with East Asian countries.

Finally, Sir Mark discussed the 2019 Spending Review, which will be an opportunity for the Prime Minister to refocus the conversation on the domestic-agenda, in particular public services. The productivity of the UK would also be a priority.

The Q&A which followed covered other EU exit issues, including continuity trade agreements, and the status of the negotiations.

The erosion of trust in public institutions was also discussed and the need to re-build public confidence in Westminster and Whitehall, as well as to address wider concerns about intergenerational tensions that the Brexit vote exposed. However, Sir Mark felt that public-sector organisations do still have support, not least because of improvements in customer service.

It was also raised that the Department for International Trade has reduced some international postings, which is a concern for some bodies that are relying on creating new trade links with the Far East post-Brexit. Sir Mark explained that he understood that the department was focusing on consolidating its regional hubs, which may be resulting in some bilateral changes in staffing. The department was also focused on continuity trade agreements; greater focus on the Far East would come following the implementation period. Sir Mark closed by emphasising that as the UK's own trade policy is developed there would also need to be a greater focus on the role of digital and services in the economy.