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Submission from the Campaign Against Arms Trade to the Public Administration Committee's inquiry into what Ministers do

1. The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) in the UK works to end the international arms trade. Around 80% of CAAT's funding comes from individual supporters. This submission focusses on CAAT's experience on the appointment of ministers from outside Parliament.
2. CAAT supporters often contact their MPs asking them to take up arms export issues with ministers. In the last few years, these ministers have usually not been elected members of the House of Commons, and many of them have been new to politics.
3. The major focus of CAAT's campaigning has been the government's arms export promotion unit. The Defence Sales Organisation was set up by Denis Healey in 1966 and located within the Ministry of Defence (MoD). It remained there, with a name change to the Defence Export Services Organisation (DESO), until April 2008. Most of its promotion functions were then moved to UK Trade & Investment (UKTI), a body responsible to the trade department, now the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). UKTI has set up a Defence and Security Organisation (UKTI DSO).
4. Other campaigning work has taken place around the work of the Export Credits Guarantee Department (ECGD), which is responsible to the Secretary of State for what is now BIS, and "corporate mercenaries", euphemistically known as private military and security companies (PMSCs). A FCO minister covers this.
5. The responsible ministers for these areas of work for the past few years are shown below :
 - a) Defence equipment ministers with responsibility for DESO:
Baroness Symons from 1999 to 2001; Lord Bach from 2001 to 2005; Lord Drayson from 2005 to 2007; Baroness Taylor from 2007 to 2008.
 - b) Trade ministers with responsibility for UKTI DSO and the ECGD:
Lord Digby Jones from 2007 to October 2008; Lord Davies of Abersoch from January 2009 to May 2010. These junior ministers reported to the Secretary of State, Lord Mandelson.
 - c) Lord Malloch-Brown was the FCO minister with responsibility for PMSCs during the crucial period before the last Government's proposals for (non-)regulation announced in April 2010.

6. Currently, the responsible ministers are all MPs, but CAAT's hopes that this would remain the case have been dashed by the appointment of Stephen Green as Trade & Investment Minister designate. It seems that, by the end of 2010, responsibility for UKTI DSO and the ECGD will once again rest with someone who has not been elected to Parliament.
7. Leaving aside the policy content and the individual personalities involved, CAAT feels there is a major problem with accountability. The ministers who are not MPs, but are responsible for, and make decisions about, those areas of government with which CAAT is most concerned, are unable to respond to debates in the House of Commons, and cannot answer parliamentary questions there in their own right.
8. Possibly more importantly, unelected ministers are not exposed to constituents who might question the morality of arms export promotion, or to local political parties or human rights or development groups which might raise the issue in debate. CAAT supporters who are constituents of one Secretary of State have already been able to meet him and to make their views known. This is, at the very least, better for democracy. Without such constituency contacts, there is little to offset the direct lobbying by companies and trade associations.
9. It has been argued that having a trade minister appointed from the business world enables more time to be devoted to travel and making contacts than would be the case with an MP with additional parliamentary duties. However, this presupposes that trade is uncontroversial. There is no recognition of the negative impact of arms export promotion, or, moving away from CAAT's own concerns, that giving export credit support to, for example, a particular dam or pipeline is hugely problematic. Trade ministers must be as accountable as other ministers.
10. If the UK is promoting democracy, not only must the ministers be fully accountable, they also need to be seen to be accountable. With the UK's two chamber legislature, there is a need for one member of each department to be a member of the House of Lords. However, unless there is an exceptional reason, it should be no more than one member and not the Secretary of State. Also, the opportunity of reshuffles should be taken to ensure that one set of responsibilities within a department is not consecutively undertaken by a Peer.

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