

# Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group on France

*Meeting, Tuesday 21st April, 2015*

## In attendance

### MSP in attendance:

Christian Allard MSP  
Cameron Buchanan MSP  
John Scott MSP, *Deputy Presiding Officer*

### Other attendees:

Christine Jones, *Treasurer, CPG*  
John Riley, *CPG Member*  
Ian MacFarlane, *Franco-Scottish Society*  
Anne-Colette Lequet, *petitioner*  
Tom Wight, *Franco-Scottish Society*  
Christian Albuissou, *Co-author of petition*  
Véronique Bévierre, *Co-author of petition*  
Brigitte Guénier, *co-author of petition*  
Maxime David, *Journalist 'Toute l'Europe'*  
Vicky Crichton, *Policy Advisor, The Scottish Government*  
Marie-Caroline Nivaigne, *Parliamentary Staff*  
Sheena Cleland, *Parliamentary Researcher*  
Anca Martin, *Edinburgh Charlie Hebdo*  
Dr John Riley, *East Dunbartonshire SNP Treasurer*  
Adèle Mortier, *Secretary to CPG, Political Attaché to Consulate General*  
Pierre-Alain Coffinier, *French Consulate General*  
Vincent Guérin, *Director French Institute*  
Alex McTear, *Veolia Group*  
Niall MacDonald, *Parliamentary Assistant to Rob Gibson MSP*  
Lee Robb, *Parliamentary Assistant to Christian Allard MSP*

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Meeting begins, 18:00

### 1. Welcome and introductions

Meeting opened by Christian Allard MSP, Convener of the CPG on France, who welcomed everyone and asked attendees to introduce themselves.

### 2. Apologies

No apologies.

### 3. Minutes of last meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

#### **4. Minute of silence to remember those killed during the attacks in Paris in January**

With pictures of gathering and vigils which have been organised across Scotland to remember all victims of the attacks

#### **5. Open discussion following Cameron Buchanan MSP's motion S4M-11853 as amended by Christian Allard MSP**

Cameron Buchanan MSP explained his great uncle has taken part in the creation of the French consulate in its current form. He would be extremely disappointed if the consulate should close. Ian McFarlane then John Scott MSP supported this declaration and urged the French government to review their decision.

Due to the proposals of the Smith Commission, Scotland is set to become a more autonomous country. During and after this time, it is the CPG hope that the historic Franco-Scottish relationship that binds the two countries continues to develop and to work to the advantage of both French and Scottish citizens. There is much to do in terms of trade, business, culture and other areas.

As a former Consul of Iceland, Cameron Buchanan MSP knows the importance of the consulates and consuls and thinks closing the French would send the wrong signal to everybody, especially now the Scottish government is set to receive more powers.

French Consul general Pierre-Alain Coffinier declared the consulate is not about to close but to be downsized due to financial reasons. He said a decision has been taken to focus the work of the French Consulate General in Edinburgh on outreach. It will continue promoting political, economic and cultural relations, building on the excellent ties between France and Scotland, which are an important aspect of the exceptional bonds between France and the United Kingdom. Some consular services will be transferred to our Consulate General in London. Visas will be outsourced but stay in Scotland. According to the Consul general, this will be prepared long enough in advance and done in the easiest way possible for French citizens living in Scotland. It is part of a general trend in Europe.

Political, commercial and cultural ties with the Scottish people and companies, as well as with the Scottish and British governments in Scotland, will be completely unaffected.

A delegation of senators will be visiting Edinburgh at the end of May to learn more about Scottish affairs. It marks the interest of France for Scotland.

A French deputy, interested in marine energy, will be visiting in June (canceled since).

French Consul general Pierre-Alain confirmed his successor (arriving in September) will have the same rank as himself: Consul general.

Another issue raised by Cameron Buchanan MSP, Ian McFarlane, Tom Wight (Franco-Scottish society) and Christian Albuissou (representative of the French community) is the replacement of the director of the French Institute in Edinburgh by the Consul general (merging of the positions). It is clear to them the work carried out by the Institute is incredibly valuable in promoting the French language and culture here in Scotland. It is also apparent that the level of work involved through the various programs from the French Institute would be detrimental to the day-to-day work of the new Consul should they be assigned to it. The concerns of the CPG is that the merger of responsibilities will, not only be too much for one person, but will have an adverse effect on the services provided by both the French Institute and by the Consulate.

Several recommendations has been made by members of the CPG : local recruitment to the post of Director of the French Institute, which could keep the cost low for funding the post / a part-time role would be preferable to a merger of the two positions and would have minimal impact on the services provided.

Christian Albuissou and Véronique Bévrière, both elected to represent the French community in Scotland, and co-authors of the petition to "save the consulate" and its services said they were still very much hoping to save the passport service for the current

French citizens living in Scotland and French citizens from the North of England. Christian Albuissou said a petition launched few years ago succeeded to save the French institute. To go to London will be too expensive and complicated for French people and especially for families. It will also discourage people with dual citizenship to keep their links with France. Christian Albuissou also explained his concern regarding the future of the French institute if the jobs of Consul general and director of the IFE are combined. He also said the French language is important, despite what Murdo Fraser MSP declared few weeks ago. Some businesses are looking for people speaking very good French and it can be difficult to find them. That's also why it seems vital to support the work of the French Institute.

Members of the CPG will write an official letter to Laurent Fabius, Minister for the foreign Affairs, to ask if there is a possibility that, with the proposed changes to the structure of the Edinburgh Consulate, that a minimal service for passports can be retained for the 5,532 current French citizens living in Scotland (and French citizens from the North of England). With the modernization of technology, there must surely be a method of providing this service to French citizens without them having to travel down to London to renew or apply for a passport.

Christian Allard, convener of the CPG, also paid tribute to Pierre-Alain Coffinier and the work he has been involved in during his time as the French Consul general in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

## **6. Veolia's business plan in Scotland**

Alex McTear, senior project manager at Veolia, presented Veolia's activities in Scotland. (cf. ppt file attached)

## **7. Networking**