**Minister follows Trump and calls for UK to quit UNESCO**

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Penny Mordaunt has told cabinet colleagues that she wants Britain to withdraw from Unesco, the UN cultural and education body.

The international development secretary’s request to end the £11.1 million funding at the end of next year raised concern among colleagues including Theresa May and Michael Gove, as well as in the Foreign Office.

Ms Mordaunt’s department ranks Unesco as its worst performing multilateral agency. She believes that its work does not meet her spending criteria for international aid.

There is deep concern about the political symbolism. Ending funding would mean Britain following the lead set last year by President Trump and Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister. Government sources also expressed worries that Britain would look like it was further retreating from the international community at the same time as Brexit.

Last month Matthew Lodge, the British ambassador to Unesco, praised the organisation in a speech. “Although challenges remain, Unesco’s finances are on a sounder footing. The political disputes that have plagued this organisation for too long have been de-escalated and there is a renewed sense of optimism for the future.”

Britain played a part in the foundation of Unesco, including hosting the conference where its constitution was agreed in 1945 as a key pillar of the postwar rebuilding of global institutions.

Ending funding for Unesco was first proposed by Priti Patel, Ms Mordaunt’s predecessor, in 2016 but vetoed by Mrs May. The Times understands that Mrs May has not changed her view.

No final decision has been made and the Department for International Development (Dfid) is working in consultation with other departments. Emily Thornberry, the Labour frontbencher, pointed out that when the Thatcher government announced a withdrawal in 1985, the former prime minister Edward Heath said that it reflected “the growth of a nasty, narrow-minded nationalism.” After an 11-year absence, Britain rejoined in 1997. She added: “Heath would be turning in his grave that today’s Tory government is doing the same, not least … simply to curry favour with Donald Trump and Binyamin Netanyahu.”

The US and Israeli administrations have repeatedly criticised Unesco for claims of anti-Israel bias.

A Dfid spokesperson said: “There has been no change to our funding commitment to Unesco. The UK is working closely with Unesco and other member states to ensure that it makes crucial reforms to deliver the best results and value for taxpayers’ money.”

Ties that bind

There are 180 organisations in the UK and Overseas Territories with formal Unesco. links These include 31 Unesco World Heritage sites.

The Unitwin/Unesco Chairs higher education programme builds networks between universities.

Global Geoparks are areas of international geological significance and Unesco Biosphere Reserves are “learning sites” for balancing sustainable economic development with protecting wildlife.