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UK threat to leave Unesco reignites debate about purpose of UN culture body

The US and Israel announced plans to leave the international organisation last year

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The General Assembly of Unesco in Paris Photo: Fernanda LeMarie - Chancellery of Ecuador

The UK's commitment to Unesco is under threat after Penny Mordaunt, the International Development Secretary, called for Britain to withdraw from the United Nations (UN) culture and education body. According to the Times, Mordaunt wants to cut the UK government's funding for Unesco, currently totalling £11.1m, at the end of next year because the UN organisation does not meet spending criteria for international aid.

A spokesman for Unesco declined to comment on Mordaunt's plan; a spokesperson for the Department for International Development says that there has been no change to its funding commitment to Unesco. "The UK is working closely with Unesco and other member states to ensure it makes crucial reforms to deliver the best results and value for taxpayers' money," a department spokeswoman says.

The move has nonetheless reignited the debate about the validity of the international organisation, capping a turbulent period; in October last year, both the US and Israel announced they were planning to leave Unesco on 31 December with the United States accusing the organisation of [anti-Israeli bias](#). Both countries are still listed on its website however as member states.

Emily Thornberry, the shadow foreign secretary, wrote in the Guardian: "Let us be clear what we are walking away from: the UN agency that among many things, is responsible for driving up literacy rates across the globe, promoting gender equality in education... and preserving more than 1,000 of the world's most important heritage sites."

Colin Renfrew of Cambridge University's McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, says Mordaunt does not seem to be very internationally-minded. "But I am pleased that she has been so swiftly overruled," he adds. There are 31 Unesco World Heritage sites in Britain including Blenheim Palace and Durham castle and cathedral.

The UK has however withdrawn from Unesco previously, suspending membership between 1985 and 1997. The Conservative

overseas aid minister Timothy Raison told the House of Commons in 1985 that Unesco was badly managed and had been “harmfully politicised”.

