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The Rt Hon Sir John Chilcot GCB
The Iraq Inquiry
35 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BQ

11 January 2011

Dear John,

Thank you for your letter of 6 January following our discussion and exchange of letters on 22 December. I have again given careful consideration to the issues that you raise. My position, however, remains unchanged.

Exchanges between the UK Prime Minister and the US President represent particularly privileged channels of communication, the preservation of which is strongly in the public interest. Even where immediate sensitivity may have passed, disclosure of the material could still prejudice relations by inhibiting future exchanges. A UK Prime Minister may be less likely to have these exchanges (or allow them to be recorded) if he is concerned that this information would be disclosed at a later time against his wishes. Inhibiting this type of free and frank exchange would represent real prejudice to the UK's relations with the US.

I recognise the exceptional nature of the Inquiry and your declared undertaking to being as open and transparent as possible. We have and will continue to consider the balance of public interest in declassification of each and every one of the Inquiry's requests. Nonetheless, it is clear to me that the public interest in publishing these particular exchanges is not outweighed by the harm to the UK's international relations that would likely be caused by the Cabinet Office authorising their disclosure. I am glad you agree with me that publication of details of discussions in memoirs by former politicians and their advisers is not the same as publication of the same information by government. I am also satisfied that the Inquiry's interest in these exchanges and ability to draw conclusions from them is already met by the fact that the documents have been made available in full.

As I have already stated, I have no objection to the 'fact and timing' of either the notes sent by Mr Blair to President Bush or their discussions being declassified. I am also content that in some cases it is possible to protect the privileged nature of the exchange and the substance of the correspondence or record while still allowing for broad discussion of their content. Material that you have asked to be declassified, including transcripts of your private hearings with witnesses, is being considered and where necessary reviewed along these lines. We will continue to provide you with responses to these as soon as possible in line with our agreed Protocol.

*Yours ever,
Gus*

Gus O'Donnell

