

Statement by Sir John Chilcot, Chairman of the Iraq Inquiry, at a news conference on Thursday, 30 July 2009

Good morning. My name is Sir John Chilcot and I am the chairman of the Iraq Inquiry. Seated on my right are the other members of the Inquiry team – Sir Lawrence Freedman, Sir Martin Gilbert, Sir Roderic Lyne and Baroness Usha Prashar.

What I'd like to do today is explain what we think our task is and how we intend to approach it. Our terms of reference are very broad, but the essential points, as set out by the Prime Minister and agreed by the House of Commons, are that this is an Inquiry by a committee of Privy Counsellors. It will consider the period from the summer of 2001 to the end of July 2009, embracing the run-up to the conflict in Iraq, the military action and its aftermath. We will therefore be considering the UK's involvement in Iraq, including the way decisions were made and actions taken, to establish, as accurately as possible, what happened and to identify the lessons that can be learned. Those lessons will help ensure that, if we face similar situations in future, the government of the day is best equipped to respond to those situations in the most effective manner in the best interests of the country.

The Inquiry will have access to all the information held by the Government and may ask any British citizen to appear before it. In the Prime Minister's words, "no British document and no British witness will be beyond the scope of the inquiry."

The potential scope of the Inquiry is considerable. Previous inquiries have tended to focus on a specific event within a relatively limited period. We have been asked to examine a range of decisions and actions over a period of eight years. There are differing views about what happened during that period, and why, which we will need to address.

The Committee was asked to start work as soon as possible after the end of July. We have already started. We have made our first requests for Government documents. We will have a huge amount of reading to do over the next few weeks to help us to identify the critical issues on which to focus.

During this initial phase the Inquiry team will engage expert specialist advisers – on international law, military operations and on reconstruction – to help us interpret the evidence.

One of our first priorities is to hear from the families of those who died during the conflict and others who were seriously affected, including veterans groups. We want to know what they think the Inquiry's priorities should be. I've already written to many of the families explaining what we're doing. We will be making arrangements to offer meetings to those who want them as soon as practicable. We will leave it to them to decide whether these discussions are held in public or private - or indeed whether they wish to talk to us at all. We want to be sensitive to, and respect, their wishes.

We come to this task with open minds and a commitment to review the evidence objectively. Each member of the committee is independent and non-partisan. We are determined to be thorough, rigorous, fair and frank to enable us to form impartial and evidence-based judgements on all aspects of the issues, including the arguments about the legality of the conflict. We will be thorough and rigorous in our analysis of the evidence, taking advice, as I have said, from a range of specialist experts.

In order to be fair to, and to get the most from, witnesses, we will adopt an inquisitorial approach to our task, taking evidence direct from witnesses rather than conducting our business through lawyers. The Inquiry is not a court of law and nobody is on trial.

But I want to make something absolutely clear. This Committee will not shy away from making criticism. If we find that mistakes were made, that there were issues which could have been dealt with better, we will say so frankly.

We are all committed to ensuring that our proceedings are as open as possible because we recognise that is one of the ways in which the public can have confidence in the integrity and independence of the inquiry process.

In that spirit, we want to ensure that as many people as possible have access to what is happening in the public hearings, either direct or through the media. That includes the possibility of public hearings being televised and live streaming on the internet. We will need to decide on the detailed arrangements nearer the time but we are committed to openness.

We will have a website for the public to access transcripts of hearings and factual and other background material, as well as details on how to contact us if they think they have information relevant to our investigations.

I have already made clear that I consider that as much as possible of the Inquiry's hearings should be in public. But if the Inquiry is to succeed in getting to the heart of what happened and what lessons need to be learned for the future, we recognise that some evidence sessions will need to be private. Sometimes that will be consistent with the need to protect national security, sometimes to ensure complete candour and openness from witnesses. But I repeat: the hearings will be held in public wherever possible.

There will be speculation about whom we call as witnesses. The people we invite to give evidence will be those we judge, having considered the material before us, are best placed to supply the information we need to conduct our task thoroughly. That will, of course, include the former Prime Minister and other senior figures involved in decision-taking. But not all of the witnesses will be household names. Some may be junior officials with vital evidence about the ways their managers and leaders acted.

We intend to complete our task as quickly as possible, but we are also determined to be thorough. We cannot know, at this stage, how long the Inquiry will take until we have read the background material and heard the evidence. If, as we work through the evidence, we consider that it would be helpful to publish an interim report, we will do so. But it is more likely, given the purpose of our inquiry – identifying lessons for the way government acts and takes decisions in the future – that our report will be a single one at the end of the Committee's deliberations. That report will be published, and then debated, in Parliament.

We recognise that our task – of identifying lessons for the future – is a difficult and important one. It is one which we all take extremely seriously. Our promise to you today is that we will approach the task in the thorough, rigorous, fair and frank way I have outlined, with a shared commitment both to openness and to completing our work as quickly as the task allows.