

Sir John Chilcot's closing statement,
17 December 2009

The Inquiry has now completed its first four weeks of public hearings, examining 38 witnesses over 23 sessions. Since July we have received more than 40 thousand Government documents (more than 12,000 from No.10 alone); and have held two public seminars, six meetings with families and veterans with a further one tomorrow.

This is no more than the end of the beginning. We expect to hold five more weeks of public hearings in the New Year: a further week to complete the narrative, covering the period 2007 to 2009, and then four weeks in January and February with the most senior decision-makers. This will mark a new phase to this round of public hearings but in subject matter we will be returning to examine more closely many of the issues that have been raised in the past few weeks.

We will hold a further round of public hearings in the middle of 2010. We shall also need to hold a number of private hearings, in circumstances where the criteria set out in the protocols on our website are met; to gather and sift additional evidence. In the round, this accumulation of evidence will provide the basis for our analysis and the ultimate conclusions and recommendations which we intend to present to Parliament before the end of next year.

The substance of our recommendations and judgements will not be known, even to the Committee, until we reach the last stages of the Inquiry. We have been given access to evidence which is necessarily held in confidence, as well as to those people who took and implemented difficult decisions. We are determined that our judgements should be fair, realistic and squarely based on a thorough review of this evidence. We shall not rush to judgements based on partial evidence or opinions of whatever kind.

While, therefore, I shall make no comments today on the substance of our report, I think this is an appropriate moment to underline certain points about the process.

In the hearings so far, a huge amount of valuable and illuminating evidence has been uncovered. That is why we approached the opening phase of hearings in the way we did. We have not been trying to ambush witnesses or score points. This is a serious Inquiry. We are not here to provide public sport or entertainment. The whole point of our approach has been to get to the facts. We ask fair questions and we expect full and truthful answers. That is the essence of a formal public inquiry, and witnesses have responded to this approach by being commendably open and candid, highlighting a number of issues which we shall examine much more closely as the inquiry continues.

Our model of questioning and our selection of witnesses in the hearings up until 11th January is designed to help establish the narrative. We took a conscious decision to do this through the oral hearings rather than through the publication of a mass of documentary material, because we believe that this is the most helpful way to provide the necessary context. We have therefore not yet made any requests to Government to declassify documents to allow them to be published. As we move into the next phase of evidence taking, where we will hear from Ministers and the most senior civil servants and military officers, the Inquiry will increasingly wish to draw on government records which are currently classified - in some cases highly classified - in its questioning. Where we do, we will seek the necessary declassification of records in advance of the relevant public hearings, with a view to making the written records publicly available.

I have been pleased and proud that our hearings have been broadcast and watched by people all over the world via the worldwide web. Just short of 70 hours of footage is now available on our website for all to watch. I have also been grateful to all the members of public who have taken the time to come and join our proceedings at the QE2 centre.

This is an exceptional level of openness. My colleagues and I remain committed to hearing as much of the evidence in public as possible. Evidence will only be heard in private in the narrow circumstances we have set out in the protocols on our website. But I would like to be absolutely clear about this –evidence sessions with key decision makers, including the former Prime Minister, will be in public. They will be openly questioned about the big issues that they were involved in.

Finally we find ourselves conducting the first public hearings of this kind in the months leading up to a General Election. This Committee is strictly non-partisan. We are determined to remain firmly outside party politics. We have informed Members of Parliament that we are ready to meet them, if they want an explanation of our working methods; but the Inquiry should not be used as a platform for political advantage. That is why we shall not be holding public hearings in the period of an election campaign.

As I said, this is the end of the beginning. We are encouraged by the progress made already. Important themes are emerging. The issues are becoming clearer, though it will take time to reach the answers. We are fully aware of how much remains to be done – this is not a single-issue inquiry, but has multiple facets and complications over an eight year period – but we remain hopeful of completing the task within about a year from now.

In closing, I want to record my thanks to the QE2 centre and to Bowtie Television for facilitating our hearings and making it possible for people across the world to follow the proceedings; and, in particular, our thanks go to our long-suffering stenographer and editor from Merrill Legal Solutions, who work so hard each day to deliver the transcripts of every session.

On the behalf of the Inquiry, may I wish them and all our audience a happy and restful holiday season.