

Statement by Sir John Chilcot about the first set of public hearings

When we launched the work of the Iraq Inquiry in July, I said that I and my colleagues came to our task with open minds and a commitment to review the evidence objectively. Our purpose is to establish what happened during the UK's involvement in Iraq, and to identify the lessons that should be learned to help future governments who may face similar situations. We are committed to an approach that is thorough, rigorous, fair and frank. We also recognise that there is a wide range of expectations about what the Inquiry will deliver and that we need to understand people's concerns and priorities.

Our approach will be to piece together the evidence from documents and the testimony of those who have first hand experience of the issues; use that to identify what went well and what did not; and - crucially - why.

I have made clear previously that no-one is on trial. The Inquiry is not a court of law, an inquest, or a statutory inquiry; and our processes reflect that position. It is not for us to make findings of guilt or innocence- only a court can do that. I have, however, made clear that we will not shy away, in our report, from making criticisms – of individuals or systems – where that is warranted.

Since July, we have been very busy:

First, the Prime Minister has given us complete access to all Government papers. We have asked for, and received, a considerable volume of written material produced by Government departments involved in Iraq. Those official records have already helped us to prepare for the public hearings that will begin on 24 November, but a substantial amount of further work will be needed in the months ahead to inform our report.

Secondly, we have sought views from a wide range of people and organisations. We want to know what issues people think are important, and to get a wide range of perspectives. We have therefore:

- Held five meetings around the UK for the families of those who were killed or are missing in Iraq. Almost 40 families participated and we are very grateful to them for the open and constructive way in which they shared their views about the issues they think the Inquiry should address. That has provided us with much food for thought. We remain interested in the views of all families and hope that anyone who was not able to attend, and those who did, who have something to say to us will feel able to get in touch and let us know their views.
- Invited Iraq veterans to attend meetings or let us have their views. A few have done so but we will do more to get a broader spectrum of views and insights as our work progresses.
- Held two excellent seminars with a range of experts who have worked and written extensively on the UK's involvement in Iraq and its implications for the wider field of international relations. The papers delivered at those seminars are on the Inquiry website. We intend to have further seminars, early next year, drawing on the views and expertise of, for example, those with experience of addressing humanitarian and post-conflict stabilisation and longer-term reconstruction issues.
- We also expect to visit the United States, and possibly other countries, to meet individuals who have a perspective to offer on the UK's actions.
- Invited anyone who wants to make points about the conflict, relevant to our terms of reference, to contact us. We have received a substantial response to that request and will consider all the material submitted. We continue to welcome contributions as our work progresses either through

our website – www.iraqinquiry.org.uk – or in writing to 35 Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3BQ.

- Following earlier discussions, we have invited leaders of the main opposition parties and Chairs of the relevant Select Committees to let us know if they have particular points they wish the Inquiry to consider. We have also invited members of both Houses of Parliament to give us views.

The next step will be to start taking oral evidence from those with first-hand experience of the development and implementation of British government policy in Iraq. The first round of public hearings will begin on 24 November, in the QE II Conference Centre in London, and run until early February 2010.

We will use the first five weeks of hearings to help establish a reliable account of the essential features of the UK's involvement in Iraq between 2001 and 2009, and how those developed. That will provide the framework on which the Inquiry's subsequent analysis will build. We will start by hearing from senior officials and military officers who had a key role in developing advice for Ministers and/or implementing government policy. We will ask them to explain the main decisions and tasks, and their involvement. That will give us a clear understanding of how policy developed and was implemented; and what consideration was given to alternative approaches. A list of those witnesses covering the period up to the invasion of Iraq will be announced on 16 November; and a further list of witnesses covering the remaining period to July this year will be announced on 30 November.

Early in the New Year, we shall begin taking evidence from Ministers (including the former Prime Minister) on their roles and decisions.

We are developing our formal lines of Inquiry. Those will take shape as we gather evidence. We will, however, begin during this first phase of public hearings to take evidence about thematic issues that are emerging as of interest to the Inquiry, including military equipment, military and civilian personnel issues, the key decisions taken and their rationale, the legal basis for military action, the development of government policy and the communication and implementation of those policies. In addition, some areas (for example the treatment of detainees, some aspects of human rights and the handling of Service personnel inquests) require further research – including ensuring that the Inquiry does not prejudice legal proceedings and/or investigations into individual cases – before deciding the Inquiry's approach to those issues.

The initial public hearings will be followed by further analysis and private hearings to take evidence on sensitive issues – as defined in the protocol on “sensitive information”, published on the Inquiry's website - and from more junior officials.

That will help prepare for a further round of public hearings, which will be held in the middle of 2010 after the General Election. In some cases, those hearings will be used to invite witnesses to discuss issues in more detail than in earlier evidence, or to pursue further lines of inquiry. New witnesses may be called at that stage.

Once we have the evidence we need, either orally or in writing, the Inquiry will be able to draw conclusions and make recommendations. We aim to report, if possible, by the end of 2010.

The Inquiry was set up as a matter of public interest, because the UK's involvement in Iraq has given rise to many serious questions. We have a responsibility to address that public interest fairly and squarely. Our

report will therefore seek to illuminate lessons from Iraq that will help to improve the process of forming and implementing policy in the future.