

Sir John Chilcot's closing statement, 8 February 2010  
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Today we are almost at the end of the Iraq Inquiry's first round of public hearings. We will hear from the current Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and International Development Secretary in a few weeks time but, given the considerable interest in the Inquiry and its approach, and to prevent any unnecessary misunderstandings, my colleagues and I have decided to set out the current position as the Inquiry sees it.

The Iraq Inquiry is here to establish a reliable account of the United Kingdom's involvement in Iraq, based on all the evidence, and identify lessons for governments facing similar circumstances in future. We are committed to being open and transparent about how we are approaching our task and the information we are receiving. This is the first inquiry of its kind in this country to have hearings broadcast on television and streamed on the internet, and tens of thousands of people have been watching the evidence sessions on our website. So far there have been nearly three quarters of a million hits on our website, where people can access more than 150 hours of video recordings and thousands of pages of transcripts of the evidence, as well as the documents which have been declassified during the hearings.

The initial hearings served two purposes. The first phase, largely before Christmas, set out to establish the narrative account of the United Kingdom's involvement in Iraq. In the last four weeks, we have focussed on the major decision makers - the politicians and senior officials, military and civilian - to examine why they made their decisions. Conducting the inquiry in this way has allowed us to hear a range of different perspectives about the same events. The evidence we have been given so far has provided a much more detailed account of the United Kingdom's military action against Iraq, and subsequent commitments, than has previously been brought together in public.

These public hearings are perhaps the most obvious aspect of our work. They are only one element of our inquiry although an essential one. The great bulk of our evidence is in tens of thousands of government documents. Many of them are highly classified. They allow us to shine a bright light into seldom-seen corners of the government machine, revealing what really went on behind the scenes before, during and after the Iraq conflict. Those documents form the central core of the Inquiry's work. The Inquiry is still receiving more documents every week, and we have no reason to believe that any material is being deliberately withheld. We have published a small number of those documents during the hearings. I should emphasise that our access to documents is unrestricted. Publishing a limited number is a separate matter.

Over the next few months we shall examine all the evidence that we have received, including those documents. That will enable us to see where the evidence joins together and where there are gaps. Only then can we decide the further evidence we need, the issues and points which need to be clarified, and the identity of witnesses we may wish to question in the next round of public hearings in the summer.

In the meantime, we will be holding a number of meetings and seminars with a range of individuals, British and non-British, who we believe will be able to provide relevant information and insights. For example these could include veterans from the Iraq campaign and officials from the former American administration. We also hope to visit Iraq later in the year. We cannot take formal evidence as such from foreign nationals, but we can of course have discussions with them.

We shall also need a limited number of private hearings to get to the heart of some very sensitive issues, which are essential for our understanding. The terms under which we will hold hearings in private have been published on our website. We will, in due course, publish as much of that evidence as we can.

The Inquiry has broken new ground and a great deal has been achieved since the launch at the end of July and we aim to complete our report by the end of the year. I would like to thank all those members of the public who have taken the time to be present at the hearings. I would also like to thank the QE2 Conference Centre for hosting us so well over the last few weeks; to Bowtie for ensuring that our proceedings are filmed and transmitted; and lastly to our tireless stenographer and editor from Merrill Legal Solutions who work so hard to keep up with the witnesses and the Committee each day and provide complete transcripts for publication each evening. With those words of thanks, I would like to draw this hearing to an end.