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

22 December 2010

Dear John,

DECLASSIFICATION

Thank you for your letter of 10 December setting out the Inquiry's position on the declassification of extracts recording exchanges between the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and President Bush. You raised a number of issues which I address below.

The fact and timing of exchanges

We have no objection to the "fact and timing" of either the notes sent by Mr Blair to President Bush or their discussions being declassified. We do not think, in this instance, that publication would damage either international relations or national security and are content for the references to "fact and timing" to be published. As I am sure you can understand, we would wish to consider any further request on its merits.

The content of exchanges

You asked me to look again at the Cabinet Office's position on these documents and to see whether we would be content to declassify them. I have done so and my view is that the public interest is not best served by their release. I judge that their release would, or would be likely to, damage the UK's international relations.

I understand the Inquiry's interest in these exchanges and in particular the important insights that they may be able to provide. However, I feel that this is met by the fact that the documents in question have been made available in full to the Inquiry to assist them in their considerations and the only point of difference is that for reasons of damage to international relations I cannot agree to the documents being declassified. I am content that in some cases it may be possible to protect the privileged nature of the exchange and the substance of the record whilst still allowing for broad discussion of its content. I am therefore currently reviewing the existing redactions of the transcript to see if any further information can be disclosed without damage to the UK's interests or prejudice to its relations. I will write shortly on this.



I would however like to pick up on two of the points you made in your letter relating to this. First is the suggestion in paragraph ten that the Cabinet Office has not considered the documents on their merits in accordance with the provisions of the Protocol. This is not the case: the reason we think the various exchanges between Mr Blair and President Bush need to be protected is because their release would, or would be likely to, damage the UK's international relations, as set out in the Protocol. In reaching a judgement on the balance of public interest, we have attached particular importance to protecting the privacy of the channel between the Prime Minister and the President. To this extent the judgement is generic, but this does not mean either that the reasons are less weighty, or that the effect of disclosure, and subsequent damage to international relations, is any less severe.

Second, you referred to the memoirs written by Mr Blair, President Bush, Alastair Campbell and Jonathan Powell and how they have all referenced, in varying degrees of detail, the content of some of the exchanges. I hope you will agree with me that the publication of details of discussions in memoirs by former politicians and their advisers is not the same as publication of the same information by the Government. I know you did not suggest this in your letter, but I should be very clear that we see a real difference between the Cabinet Office agreeing to declassify information, and thereby effectively authorising its disclosure, and the Department reviewing the contents of memoirs and making recommendations to the author, in line with the Radcliffe principles.

I appreciate this is not the answer you were looking for and I am sorry that we have not been able to come to a mutual agreement on these documents. I recognise the effort and very substantial achievements on declassification on both sides.

Yours ever,

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