

Sir John Chilcot's opening statement
24 November 2009

Welcome to the Iraq Inquiry's first day of public hearings. For those of you who do not know me, I am Sir John Chilcot chairman of the Iraq Inquiry. I am joined by my colleagues Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, Professor Sir Martin Gilbert, Sir Roderic Lyne and Baroness Usha Prashar. Together we form the Iraq Inquiry Committee. Next to me is Margaret Aldred who is the Secretary to the Inquiry.

The Iraq Inquiry was set up to identify the lessons that should be learned from the UK's involvement in Iraq to help future governments who may face similar situations.

To do this, we need to establish what happened. We are piecing this together from the evidence we are collecting from documents or from those who have first hand experience. We will then need to evaluate what went well and what didn't – and, crucially, why.

My colleagues and I come to this task with open minds. We are apolitical and independent of any political party. We want to examine the evidence. We will approach our task in a way that is thorough, rigorous, fair and frank.

The Committee and I are also committed to openness and are determined to conduct as much of our proceedings in public as possible. I welcome those members of the public who join us here today –thank you for taking the time and effort to travel here this morning. I also welcome the media present here at the QEII. For those not physically present, I am pleased that the Inquiry proceedings are available for broadcast and are being streamed on the internet.

These public hearings are the activity which will attract the most publicity but they form only one part of our work.

Over the past months we have requested and received mountains of written material from Government departments involved in Iraq during 2001 – 09. We have spent many hours combing through these official records – and will continue to do this in the months ahead. We are confident that we will have access to all the material that we need.

But we don't want to, and are not, just hearing from the 'official' representatives. We value hearing a broad spectrum of views from a wide range of people and organisations. We want to know what people across Britain think are the important questions. We want to get a range of challenging perspectives on the issues we are considering. We've already made a start on this by holding:

- Five meetings with the families of those who were killed or are missing in Iraq. We are very grateful to all those who came to talk to us.
- preliminary meetings with Iraq veterans
- two seminars with a range of experts. We hope to have a further seminars early next year

We have also asked anyone who has information, or who wants to make points, relevant to our terms of reference to contact us. We thank all those who have already been in touch.

The next phase begins today. We have called as witnesses those with first-hand experience of the development and implementation of UK government policy in Iraq. Our first round of public hearings begins today and runs until early February 2010. We will then take a break from public hearings, returning to our analysis of written material. We will hold some private hearings: to take evidence on matters which if disclosed in public would cause harm to the public interest, or where there are other

genuine reasons why a witness would have difficulty being frank in public. The circumstances in which we will hold private hearings are set out in the Protocols published on the Inquiry website.

There will be a further round of public hearings in the middle of 2010. We expect to invite back some previous witnesses and, where relevant, call some new ones. What I would like to stress now is that people should not jump to conclusions if they do not hear everything they expect to in the first round of hearings: there will be more to follow.

Once we have collected all the evidence we need, we will be in a position to draw conclusions and make recommendations. We plan to report by the end of 2010. It is not in our, or the country's, interest to delay the process. Our objective, however, is to produce a thorough analysis that makes a genuine contribution to improving public governance and decision making. If that takes a bit longer, I hope people will bear with us.

That is for next year. For now it might be useful to set out today what we aim to cover in the initial phase of public hearings, and how we plan to conduct our business;

We want to establish a clear understanding of the various core elements of the UK's involvement in Iraq, and how these developed over time. We will start by hearing from the senior officials and military officers who had a key role in developing advice for Ministers and/or implementing government policy. We want them to take us through the main decisions and tasks. That will give us a clear understanding of the various strands of British policy development and implementation since 2001. We will learn the reasons why particular policies or courses of action were adopted, and what consideration was given to alternative approaches.

Once we have heard that initial evidence, we will begin to take evidence from Ministers and other officials about issues which run throughout the period we have been asked to consider. In some cases, we will be able – on the basis of the evidence we have heard from officials earlier in the session – to get into considerable detail. In other cases, we may need to return to a number of the issues at a later stage. It will be during those hearings in the New Year- and not before- that we will be hearing about the legal basis for military action.

In all our questioning we will be drawing on the vast number of documents that we have already read. This has given us a good sense of the main events of the period; the issues and pre-occupations. Oral evidence will build on our previous knowledge. It will help develop our lines of inquiry- these, I must stress, are still developing. We remain, as we have been from the outset, open minded. What we are committed to, and what the British general public can expect from us, is a guarantee to be thorough, impartial, objective and fair.

Perhaps this is an appropriate moment to set out our expectations of how these proceedings will run.

Iraq Inquiry Committee members will ask the questions. Witnesses will respond for themselves. We expect them always to give evidence that is truthful, fair and accurate. We do not intend to ask questions today that will involve evidence that might harm national security or other important public interests as described in the Protocols we have published. In the extremely unlikely event that evidence moved towards such matters sensitive to national security, I would intervene to halt the proceedings.

As I have said before, we are not a court or an inquest or a statutory inquiry; and our processes will reflect that difference. No-one is on trial. We cannot determine guilt or innocence. Only a court can do that. But I make a commitment here that once we get to our final report, we will not shy away from making criticisms where they are warranted.

Finally, as I said earlier, we are pleased that these are public sessions. We welcome those who join us today and will do so over the coming weeks. These are, however, serious matters that we examine; we want to get to the heart of what happened and do not wish to be distracted in our task by disturbances. We have set out on our website and to all here today the behaviours we expect from those present in the hearing room. They are no different from those expected of the public when they attend Parliament. Just as there, those who fail to meet them will have to leave.

And so to the proceedings of today: as I set out above the first five weeks of these hearings aim to establish the main features of UK involvement in Iraq 2001- 2009. We have invited to give evidence those senior officials and military personnel who (by the posts they occupied) had a unique perspective on UK government decision making and the implementation of those policies. Today we start in 2001. Before me sit Sir Peter Ricketts, who in 2001, was Director General Political in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Sir William Patey who was the Head of the Foreign Office's Middle East Department and Simon Webb who was Policy Director in the Ministry of Defence.