

From: The Rt Hon Sir John Chilcot GCB

To: The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

21 June 2009

Dear Prime Minister,

Thank you for your letter of 17 June about the Iraq Inquiry. I am grateful for your assurance of the Government's commitment to a thorough and independent inquiry, and for the steps that have already been taken with former and current Ministers, and Departments, to ensure full cooperation, transparency and access to government documents. I welcome the fact that I and my colleagues are free to decide independently how best to fulfil our remit.

I am for my part wholly committed to the search for the lessons to be learned for the future from events and experience of the last seven and more years, to uphold the integrity of the process of inquiry and the need to ensure public confidence in it, and to ensure complete candour and openness from witnesses while protecting national security. I will indeed, as you suggest, examine how best, given the non-judicial nature of the Inquiry, a formal undertaking can be given by witnesses that their contributions will be complete, truthful and accurate.

If a judicial inquiry, or a statutory Tribunal of Inquiry, had been established, then I would not have been asked to take on this responsibility. That would have required an extended process, with legal representation for the tribunal, witnesses, and other interested parties. That is not what we have been asked to conduct. To find without extended delay the key lessons for the future from the Iraq experience is however something I believe is well worthwhile.

I have as you suggested begun a process of consultation with the Leaders of the main Opposition parties, and with the Chairs of the relevant Parliamentary Select Committees (Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Public Administration as well as the Intelligence and Security Committee). I see this as helping the Inquiry to decide how best we can structure our procedures to fulfil our remit and meet the objectives we have been set. When these consultations have been completed, I expect to be in a position, having taken them fully into account, to say in more detail how we will propose to take the Inquiry forward.

As part of that, it will, I wholeheartedly agree, be essential to ensure that the families of those who gave their lives in Iraq, or were seriously affected by the conflict, have an early opportunity to express their views about the nature and procedures of the

Inquiry, and to express them either in public or in private as they prefer, That will be important in helping us to decide how to go about the task, and explain what we are going to do.

I have also concluded that the Inquiry will need expert assessors at the highest level, including in military, legal, and international development and reconstruction matters, and I have already begun to identify people who may be willing to serve in that capacity. Then, when we have settled on how we are going to go about the Inquiry, I am sure it is right that we should explain this in open session.

More broadly, I believe it will be essential to hold as much of the proceedings of the Inquiry as possible in public, consistent with the need to protect national security and to ensure and enable complete candour in the oral and written evidence from witnesses.

One important point which has not received much public notice so far is that examining and analysing the very large body of existing documentary evidence, stretching over seven or more years, will necessarily occupy a significant part of the time available to the Inquiry, especially in the early stages, and by definition that part of the process cannot be conducted in public sessions. The results of that examination and analysis will, however, be crucial in guiding the selection of witnesses and the detailed questions that will then need to be answered. I expect our report will publish all the relevant evidence except where national security considerations prevent that.

A particular suggestion which has been made is that the Inquiry might make an interim report, possibly on the run-up to the war, or up to the moment when the coalition assumed responsibility for Iraq's internal affairs. While I do not rule out the possibility, it seems to me clear that the causes and effects of particular phases of these events cannot simply be divided up so as to separate clearly one period from another. To take one obvious example, the existence or otherwise of weapons of mass destruction could not be established with any reliability until well after the conflict phase, after the work of the Iraq Survey Group and others had gone as far as it could, while before the event the outstanding possibility had significant implications for the military deployment into the initial conflict phase.

Because we will need to give careful attention to what comes out of the consultation processes I have outlined, I am, as I said, not yet in a position to state in more detail exactly how we will conduct the Inquiry. It is however already clear to me that as much as possible of the work of the Inquiry as is consistent with fulfilling our remit should be conducted, or explained, in public.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John Cairns". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.