Tuesday, 15 June 2010

MR EDWARD CHAPLIN, THE HON DOMINIC ASQUITH and

MR CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE

THE CHAIRMAN: Can I open the session with a welcome to Edward Chaplin and Christopher Prentice and we expect Dominic Asquith will join us shortly.

Unlike previous occasions on which both of you have appeared before the Committee, the session is being held in private because we recognise much of the evidence on the areas we want to cover will be sensitive within the categories set out in our Protocol on Sensitive Information, on grounds of international relations or national security. In particular, we want to use this session to explore issues covered by classified documents.

We will apply the Protocol between the Inquiry and HMG regarding Documents and Other Written and Electronic Information in considering whether and how evidence given in relation to classified documents and/or sensitive matters more widely can be drawn on and explained in public, either in the Inquiry Report or, where appropriate, at an earlier stage.

If other evidence is given during this hearing which neither relates to classified documents nor engages any of the categories set out in the Protocol on Sensitive Information, that evidence would be capable of being published, subject to the procedures set out in the Inquiry Secretary's letter.

I recognise that witnesses give evidence based on their recollection of events, and we check what we hear against the papers to which we have access.

I remind every witness on every occasion that they will later be asked to sign a transcript of their evidence to the effect that the evidence they have given is truthful, fair and accurate. For security reasons, we will not be releasing copies

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of the transcript outside this building. So to review it, I'm afraid you will have to come here, but at your convenience.

With that, and still expecting Dominic Asquith to join us, I'll turn to the first set of questions and ask Martin Gilbert to open.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: You took up your appointment as ambassador just as the Iraqi interim government led by Allawi had taken office. You reported after your meeting with Allawi on 17 July that his "desire for an overall strategy which includes economic and political elements is sound, and his wish for specific UK help sincere, especially when he thinks we do things better than the United States".

THE CHAIRMAN: Shall we pause?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I'm so sorry.

THE CHAIRMAN: Not at all.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I have run.

THE CHAIRMAN: Can I just say one thing? I read the standard opening mantra, but there's one bit I probably ought to lay emphasis on, which is that if evidence is given during this hearing which doesn't relate to classified documents or engages any of the sensitive categories in our protocol, that evidence would be capable of being published, but subject to the letter you have had from the Inquiry Secretary.

Martin, apologies, let's restart.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: I was just quoting from your report, your general point about Allawi's desire for an overall strategy including economic and political elements being sound, and his wish for UK help sincere, especially, as you wrote, when he thinks we do things better than the United States.

What I want to ask first, really, is what were your

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expectations of his government when first appointed, and how did he live up to them?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: I think I referred on a previous appearance to one of the very striking things even for those who, like me, had been in jobs dealing with Iraq before I took up my post, one of the very striking things being the sheer lack of capacity in not just the Prime Minister's office, but in other ministerial offices. So I suppose we rapidly had to adjust our expectations about what the appointed Iraqi government and Allawi could achieve to that very basic fact.

That was also one of the areas I was probably thinking of when I referred to things that [redacted] You will have seen that one of the key things we did was to help him set up his own office and help it run more smoothly.

But I think beyond that, more generally, we thought and found Allawi to be a credible figure in the sense that he was a strong and certainly courageous politician who commanded a certain degree of confidence.

His weakness, and this applied also to a number of other government ministers, was that he was one of the opposition leaders. He had spent most of the ghastly years of the Saddam Hussein rule in relative comfort in exile, and I think I referred before to the divide between those elements of the new Iraq who had suffered and fought against Saddam Hussein during those years and those who had sat that out in exile, and the natural degree of mistrust between them. So that was just one of the obstacles Allawi had to face.

Probably lack of capacity to get things done was the key thing, and it often came out in the conversations I had with him, his frustration. For example, on the security front he

didn't have the tools to do things with. He wanted to be Commander in Chief as well as Prime Minister, but for a long time he felt he didn't have the wherewithal to do it.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: In your report of the same conversation, you mentioned that he was keen to get our help with regard to the intelligence agency and assessment architecture, [redacted] [redacted]. Was he able to do this? Was this something on which he was able to make progress?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: I don't think we were able to achieve very much very quickly. I mean, the intelligence apparatus was certainly [redacted]. But certainly building up the Iraqi intelligence capability was something that everybody recognised, but it was very difficult to do, and even more difficult than in other parts of the administrative machine.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: What effort did we make? How did we try to do this in terms of individuals and structures?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Well, I don't think this is very much documented, certainly not in the sense of my memory, rather than the documents.

I think not very much in the period that I was there, frankly, because I can recall at a later stage there was a conversation -- I'm just citing my notes here. There was discussion in January 2005, I recall, that we had, we in the embassy had, with the senior American in [redacted] [redacted]. That was, amongst other things, identifying -- I think this was about the same time as there was an assessment mission, in fact two assessment missions that the Americans sent, one under General Luck and another under Dick

Jones that Dominic Asquith was part of. The Luck report, I think, identified the problem of weak intelligence structures and the need for a fundamental overhaul. So it suggests to me that whatever we tried to do in the meantime, since July 2004, had not been very effective.

We did actually do something -- I think our main effort was down in the south, where of course we had every interest in making intelligence structures more effective. But I recall that we ran into a lot of difficulty there, mainly the sort of internecine strife between different Iraqi factions which made it impossible to do classic capacity building.

THE CHAIRMAN: Could I just ask, in Baghdad, de-Ba'athification must have had the effect of removing pretty well the totality of experienced professional intelligence.

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Yes, that's a good point, both in the military and on the intelligence side. De-Ba'athification might in some civilian ministries stop at a reasonable middle level, although even then it was a problem. But certainly the intelligence structure would have been swept away completely.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Could I add one thing? Am I allowed to chip in on that?

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes, please.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Certainly in the period of August 2004, when I was there and Edward was off out of the country, which coincided with the whole Najaf fiasco or operation, it was very clear what Allawi was after. There were two things he was after. He was after an independent intelligence service, and he felt that [redacted]. So that made it extremely difficult to intervene or interweave ourselves into

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the structures because they were jealously guarding their assets.

But secondly, what he wanted was

EDWARD CHAPLIN:

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: In the context of this private hearing, what would your sort of reaction be to the argument that we invested too much support for Allawi at the expense of other emerging leaders? Was this something which was on your mind at the time?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: No, I don't think that was -- certainly not in the period -- well, I was there for the whole period that Allawi was Prime Minister. Allawi emerged as Prime Minister from a fairly messy, typically Iraqi process. We didn't have any choice by the time he was appointed. That was the achievement of the Bremer administration. And I don't actually think, even if we were starting again, we would have necessarily come up with a different or better figure.

So we worked with the people that we were given to work with. We didn't, of course, uniquely talk to or deal with him. Part of the job of myself and the embassy as a whole was to be in touch with a very wide range of political figures, both inside and outside the government, and I think we did a reasonable job of that within the security constraints, the other constraint

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being the unwillingness of some of the more extreme parties to talk to us or to be seen talking to us, rather, because actually they were quite keen to talk to us.

But I think we invested as much effort as we reasonably could in that full range, with the overall aim, because that was our first priority, of helping the political process along towards elections in January 2005 and, in particular, trying to ensure that they were as broadly representative as possible. So there was a lot of contact with Sunni figures that we could get at, and there was a lot of encouragement to Allawi to do that sort of outreach himself. That's one area I referred to before where we were probably a bit more active, certainly in the early months,

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Would that be your view as well? Were you directly involved?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: The two points that Edward mentioned, the last, the Americans were never very keen on outreach to the Sunnis, I would endorse 100 per cent. That wasn't just . That was so even before, to the point when I arrived in end of March/early April 2004, the Sunni Arabs of Anbar province rejected their "representatives" as outsiders. That was true. That reflected the lack of trust and interest that the Americans at both political and military levels at that time had towards any Sunni Arab, on the assumption that they were tainted with Ba'athism, which was to a large extent, in proportionate terms, yes, true.

In terms of your first question about investing too much in Allawi, I think you should see it in the context of trying to find somebody who did not fall immediately into the very

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tough -- the very rigid sectarian mould. He was on the scene the only alternative, the only credible alternative.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: With regard to the January elections, did we hope that Allawi would stay because we felt he would be more likely to deliver our agenda?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: That certainly was the view of quite a large number of us, yes, from the Prime Minister downwards.

EDWARD CHAPLIN: He was a genuinely secular figure who was Shia but not sectarian, seen as non-ideological, a tough man, someone who would have some credibility with the military and so on. So from that point of view he seemed a better choice than some of the others emerging.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: Just exactly on that point, I think seeing Allawi's performance in the recent election and the way that he is now presented tends to confirm that judgment.

THE CHAIRMAN: I'm just going to ask, thinking of the American perspective on it, were they heavily invested in Chalabi and the other emigres associated with him?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: I think parts of the American administration were heavily invested in that. The people Chalabi had managed to get to and charm them into thinking that, actually, if you just handed the whole project over to him, it would all be sweetness and light. But I don't think [redacted] and certainly didn't go out of their way to favour his ascendency. Our line had always been, from way, way back, from way before the invasion, that the exiled leaders would have to -- the only thing that really counted with the exile leaders was whether they got the votes when they got back.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: The American relationship with Chalabi was

an extraordinary one, and changed 180 degrees as he changed 180 degrees in about May 2004, [redacted]

[redacted] He was pretty well out of the reckoning in terms of a political role -- a national political role, as opposed to a specific political role he had in charge of the de-Ba'athification Committee -- until roughly the beginning of 2007 when he came back into the fold through the Iraqi-led security operation. Then he stayed in the reckoning, I guess. But there was a long sort of Churchill period in the wilderness.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: He never got votes, did he?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: And he was consistently in opinion polls the most unpopular Iraqi politician.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: How did he hold on to the de-Ba'athification role?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Because he had all the information. As soon as we went in in 2003, he took over all the documents into his possession. He possessed all the skeletons and didn't release them.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: He was the Daily Telegraph.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: And through the first year and a half, he -- in the first year he was still, in the eyes of the American defence establishment, the one who led them in.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: One final question on Allawi. Just looking back over your time, could you give us your frank assessment of the pluses and minuses of his achievement and his failures?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: I think there's a reporting telegram on this somewhere. I think that he certainly [redacted]

[redacted]

But he did achieve -- he did hold things together. He avoided major disasters. He made the right call, I think, on Fallujah against some doubting voices, including our own. And despite a lot of doubts from himself, and certainly from many of his government, he delivered the elections in January 2005, which was, in the period I was there, obviously the key event.

He was handicapped by a lot of things: the lack of capacity I have already mentioned; the infighting amongst his own ministers; All those sort of things, but on the key things I think I would be reasonably generous. As we have just been discussing, it's not clear that we would have found anyone better from the likely candidates at the time.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: And that's very much the summation of your valedictory, which is good.

THE CHAIRMAN: Martin, could I have a quick postscript on that, on Allawi?

As a generally secularist politician, I think you said somewhere that he simply refused to have any contact with the Shia clerical community. Was that a serious limitation at that time?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: I don't know how serious, looking back, it was. At the time it seemed quite serious. Sistani was his own man. He had to take account of the Iranian assets that they had built up. And there

was a time just after the elections in the long process and the formation of the new government, which took about three months, where Sistani, through his right-hand man, Shahrastani, was pleading with Allawi to come into the government to play a role in the government, which Allawi refused because he couldn't bear to be labelled as Sistani's man.

Actually, in retrospect, and given what Christopher has just said about the way he came out in his latest elections, it was probably right for him to have a spell out of the government, [redacted].

THE CHAIRMAN: Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: Another observation from the later period, that as Allawi was preparing for the comeback - and then there was his participation, and indeed eventual victory and he gets crowned in the elections - he definitely saw it as a priority to re-establish at least a neutral to positive relationship with Sistani. Indeed, in discussing how he was planning his campaign, [redacted] this was in the autumn of 2008 -- to have it quite visible to the political world that he was no longer PNG in Najaf.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: I would like to turn now to the constitution.

You wrote in one of your reports on 3 February 2005, discussing the drafting of the constitution:

"I see advantage in a low public profile, with some quiet advocacy of options which we think the parties should consider, but always making clear that only the Iraqis can decide what suits them."

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Do you think, during your time in Iraq, we reached the right balance between being low profile and being pro-active in the early stages of the constitution discussions?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Yes. The whole constitutional process only got going towards the end of my time there because, as I say, it took three months for the government to be formed, and I left in the middle of May 2005. So it had only just got going.

Also, the thrust of this was to make sure that the process of drafting the constitution was visibly an Iraqi owned process and not being controlled by any of the Coalition partners. The Americans were equally sensitive about that.

As I recall, our main effort was to make sure that they made sensible use of the expertise of the UN. There was this guy, Fink Haysom, who was a real expert, and it was more to do with -- as much to do with the process as the substance. Of course they had to decide what they wanted in their constitution, but they should draw on the expertise of the UN to set up a process which made sense. They should look to them for advice about how to make it genuinely inclusive, how to provide a consultative process, and turn to them for bright ideas on how you devise a constitution that takes account of the different ethnic, religious and other elements which are not unique to Iraq.

In that, I think, we did -- as I recall, in my last few weeks there was a question of extracting from the Chairman of the Constitutional Assembly, or the Chairman of the National Assembly at the time, a key figure, an Iraqi, who had to actually sign an invitation letter to the UN to send Fink Haysom.

We did a lot of support -- just as we gave a lot of support to the UN effort on the preparation for elections, we gave a lot

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of support to the other UN experts who came.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: That was welcome and accepted?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Yes, and I think it was reasonably low profile. But Dominic will have a better sense of how it proceeded after that.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: What I wanted to ask you was essentially what were our aspirations for the constitution, and to what extent were they included in the final version?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: To lay the basis for a representative democracy which kept the country together, which didn't build in sectarian advantages or ethnic advantages, and which didn't create a form of federalism which was going to increase the risk of the country splitting, fundamentally, with, of course, a series of structures, both in terms of provincial, legislative structures and government structures, that could command the loyalty of Iraqis and respected the authority of government.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: And in terms of the democratic base and polity that we envisaged?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think it's fair to say that our approach was to recognise the religious and ethnic composition of the country, and that it would be difficult to get a constitution through which didn't in its outcome reflect that proportionality of both ethnic and sectarian divisions.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: And it achieved that? What elements in it were there that didn't push this?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I don't think it commanded the support of the Sunni Arab community, principally because they boycotted the January 2005 elections, and to a large extent wrote themselves out of the political programme thereafter until the next set of

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elections, which I'm sure we will come to, when we were trying to do to get them back into the political process over that period.

So in terms of the constitution drafting, it was seen to be, to a large extent, commanded by the Kurdish and Shia elements in Iraqi polity.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: So a redress of balance, but not the balance that was ideal?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: No, and although our intention in everything we did was designed to put the UN at the forefront of the work with the Iraqis in writing the constitution, the Americans were working to a domestic political timetable which required the constitution to be written and then be put to referendum. For their own congressional reasons, they ended up -- the Americans ended up -- having to, in their view, broker some of the compromises.

THE CHAIRMAN: Could I just ask at this point, there is a strong Shia-Kurdish axis going on, isn't there, in mutual interest? From our perspective, did that carry more of a risk of Sunni exclusion or -- and perhaps it's the same thing, only more extreme -- an actual risk of break-up?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Very much both. The Kurds had jealously guarded from 2003 what they had achieved in their view in the ten or so years before, and were not going to relinquish any of the autonomy that they had secured beforehand.

For the Shia, the perennial question in terms of federalism which related to the constitution was how the constitution would deal with the ability of provinces to band together, group together, and vote themselves for the creation of a Kurdish style semi-independent federal entity; and for the nine Shia provinces of the south, that was a continual problem,

█████████████████.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: Again, looking at it from a slightly different end of the telescope, the Sunni attitude to the federal issue has been allayed somewhat by the experience of the years, in that, for whatever reasons, the effect of the Charge of the Knights and the assertion of government authority in Baghdad, which followed the experience of militia chaos across the south, led the Basra referendum attempt at provincial separatism and the assertion of a separate Basra province to fail catastrophically; and led ISCI, the proponents of "Hakimistan" the nine-province solution, to actually distance themselves implicitly, though not explicitly, from that posture over the last years.

So the way that the constitution was framed, I would say, has actually in that respect fairly well stood the test of time, and the Sunnis' fears of it, real at the time, may not have actually proved to have been well founded.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Can I just ask a slightly broader question on the constitution?

To what extent did the constitution embody the initial ambitions that the Coalition had had at the time that the action to topple Saddam Hussein was mounted? Were the sort of ideas of women's rights, equality of opportunity, freedom of worship and so on, the liberal western values that the neo-cons in particular thought could be transplanted into Iraq, reflected at all in the outcome?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Imperfectly, but I think some of them were reflected in the letter. The problem with the constitution was always how it was going to be implemented, and in some respects, in terms of creating a unified federal democratic state -- in the specific case of women's rights, there was a long battle, as

you know, in the constitution over the articles relating to that which wasn't a battle perfectly won. But in terms -- I think what the analysts would have said, or the neo-cons would have said, is that in other respects, in the case of women's rights, they were respected in terms of the electoral system, where you had a quota allocated for women. So if you were looking overall, you looked at the constitution with the electoral system.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Can I ask now a final tranche of questions about the Ja'afari government, and first of all, what his attitude to us was and what influence we were able to assert with his government?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Shall I start? Because he was identified as the candidate of the Shia list about three weeks after the election, I suppose, some time in late February, I think, and from then on, I had -- I had already had dealings with him because a Deputy President or Vice President in the Allawi government. I had some dealings with him, mainly about the formation of the government, where the main issue was never mind before we got to the constitutional process; it was including serious and credible Sunni figures in his government, despite the fact that they had dealt themselves out of the election.

So that was the main tenor of our discussion with him, plus the sort of practical support, again, that he wanted to carry on in a slightly different way from the support that we had given to Allawi, and we succeeded in doing that.

But the government was finally formed, I think, only on 4 May, and even then there were some gaps in the portfolio. So it was really only a few weeks before I left that the government itself got into operations. You would have to ask William Patey if he was here about the nitty-gritty of that.

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DOMINIC ASQUITH: I saw Ja'afari largely from the London end. Obviously I continued to visit as director for Iraq. So it's at one remove to a large extent. When I met him, as I did fairly often, they were always very long meetings, because he tended to talk about anything but politics. Churchill was one of his favourite topics. Queen Victoria was another. We used even to get onto Greek mythology quite often.

He was well disposed. We continued with him, as Edward said -- we continued with him the process, through Adam Smith International, of trying to build the capability of his own office and a Cabinet Office type structure. He wasn't enthusiastic about the latter.

In terms of building his own office, he operated out of a villa. It was fairly amateur, and we had a British diplomat who was attached to him throughout, I think, the time that he was there, certainly a large chunk of the time, designed to coach him in administration - not on the policies, but on how to co-ordinate policies through government.

Were we successful? Honestly, no. [redacted] but he was more open than his successor. That's what I would say about him.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: [redacted]

DOMINIC ASQUITH: [redacted]

THE CHAIRMAN: ?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: .

EDWARD CHAPLIN: He wasn't a Minister of Health in the Allawi government?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: No, in the CPA. There were ministries, but they weren't called ministers.

SIR MARTIN GILBERT: And in terms of his political behaviour?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: His political behaviour was perfectly friendly, well disposed, but I come back.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I want to look at the December 2005 elections and Maliki.

Just to start off with, looking at the Defence and Overseas Policy on Iraq, of 1 December 2005 when you were present, it's sort of an assessment of the coming elections and what's likely to happen. It's quite upbeat. The prospect of the Sunnis coming back into government is assessed.

I was struck by something the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said, summing up:

"We should emphasise to the United States that actions on the part of the Shia such as the recent discoveries of illegal prisons and potentially large-scale disqualifications of

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respectable the Sunni candidates, risk provoking civil war more than the terrorist actions off Al-Zarqawi."

Was that a general view at that time?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Can I set it in context?

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Please do.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Then I think I can answer that question better.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: [redacted].

THE CHAIRMAN: [redacted]?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: [redacted]

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Jadriya, this particular case of the centre where detainees were tortured by, to all intents and purposes, Shia militias, but who were wearing uniforms or were protected by the security establishment, which was Shia dominated, was really dangerous tinder for Sunni Arabs -- it would have ignited a Sunni Arab conception that they could have no part of any Iraq that was envisaged.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So with that background you have the election, which doesn't quite produce any immediate outcome that you might have hoped.

To what extent, having been through all of this before, do you think you were more ready to play an active role in influencing government formation, and to what extent were you able to do so?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: The Prime Minister instructed senior officials and his Foreign Secretary to work on this one, to help the formation of the government in Iraq as soon as possible, which reflected two things. One is our experience from the previous time. Secondly, the desire not to lose the momentum that the elections had produced in terms of elections that had included many more people, many more Iraqis than the previous ones.

So there was a series of visits from the Foreign Secretary and from senior officials to Iraq, to Baghdad, to try and persuade the politicians, the Iraqi politicians, to come to agreement.

In terms of, were we better prepared? Well, we were prepared to do that. Were we more successful? Clearly not.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We hadn't really thought of Maliki. As

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far as I can see, he doesn't appear in any of the papers until quite late on. So how did we view his emergence, when we became aware of this? Was there is a good reason why we missed out on him as a potential contender?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: The last question first. Yes, because he was not a prominent political figure in the Daw'a Party. He had occupied no position where we had had to deal with him. He wasn't even viewed inside the Daw'a Party as a leading contender, and he came through at the end very much as the compromise candidate because nobody could agree on the other candidates.

Did we know him? No, we didn't. When he was chosen as Prime Minister designate, I think I was the first official to have met him. I went over and had quite a long discussion with him.

He was very well disposed, particularly to those things that we were prepared to continue, which was building up the capability of a new Prime Minister's office and trying to develop and retain what we had in terms of the supporting structure for the Cabinet. He betrayed nothing but a good disposition to us and to what we might be able to provide. I think I recorded it as a positive discussion.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But in terms of his emergence, he got in as a compromise, reading the papers, because he seemed more nationalist and less pro-militia than perhaps other candidates?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think he principally got in because the supporters of the other candidates wouldn't switch their vote to alternatives, except for him. I think for the supporters of the alternative candidates, he was the one they could bring themselves to vote for because he wasn't the other.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: [redacted]

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: This was within the --

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I'm not sure I altogether agree with that. There is an element -- I don't think there was a strong element. So I think --

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: There was a more positive set of feelings as well.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: .

SIR RODERIC LYNE: How much influence did Sistani have over the choice?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Difficult to tell. My perception was not a great deal. He[1] needed to be a Shia, but from which bit of the Shia branch it wasn't clear at that stage. It may have been true, if you pieced together the evidence afterwards and looked at who Maliki's close associates were, one of his closest was the person who became Minister for Oil, Shahrastani, who was very close to Sistani.

I don't think, from what I know of Sistani's character, and I have never met him, but from what I can detect of his character, I don't think it would be in his character to

intervene in who should be chosen as Prime Minister.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE:

DOMINIC ASQUITH: It's unquestionably true. It's unquestionably true. Kalilzad, as so often the Americans did on all the government formations that I witnessed, changed his views.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mehdi had been our hope, hadn't he?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Mehdi had been the hope for some, but he had supporters and detractors.

EDWARD CHAPLIN: It's a good example of the messy world of Iraqi politics. We liked him because he seemed to be pretty capable. In the Allawi government, he was a fairly capable Minister of Finance. The Kurds liked him. He had spent a long time in Kurdistan. That was precisely why he didn't recommend himself as a favourite candidate to the Shia. So even if Khalilzad had favoured Mehdi, I'm not sure he would have succeeded in getting his way.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: It was said in my time that he had switched, come across the political spectrum so many times. He started as a communist and ended up being accused of being susceptible to Iranian influence.

[1] i.e. the candidate

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DOMINIC ASQUITH: And Ba'athist. He was a communist and a Ba'athist.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: But in my time, anyhow, he was pre-eminent as the sensible, moderate, balanced person with vision, and wasted as Vice President.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Let's move on to discuss the policies of the Maliki government, starting with national reconciliation. When you meet him in August 2006, you say:

"I discussed how best HMG could support his efforts on national reconciliation. He thanked us for our interest and was frank with us. He admitted that some in the government were not optimistic about the reconciliation process. Others had different views primarily because they did not see it producing results."

How did you assess his own commitment to this process?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I was prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt at that stage, and said as much the following month in my almost - first impressions dispatch, where I pointed out that his intentions, even to his own government, were an enigma. Was he a sectarian going through the motions of reconciliation, or was he a genuine power sharer who was constrained by Shia supremacists? At that stage I was prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt, that he was somebody who was prepared to support reconciliation and recognise that as important.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But you changed your view on that?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: By the time I left in August I was persuaded that what he understood as reconciliation was not what we understood as reconciliation. It was reconciliation on Shia terms, and it was some participation in government, but it was not in any sense forgiveness or an attempt to wipe the slate

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clean of the past.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: In your valedictory, you say:

" ."

DOMINIC ASQUITH:

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: " "

DOMINIC ASQUITH:

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I want to ask you, Christopher.

Can I just before, with Dominic, the other part of this is Basra and his attitude towards Basra, which is obviously of relevance to us.

Again, just quoting you from May 2007:

" "

Perhaps you would just like to say more about how you viewed his attitude to Basra.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: A complete puzzle.

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SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: ?

DOMINIC ASQUITH:

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: ?

DOMINIC ASQUITH:

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN:

DOMINIC ASQUITH:

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE:

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DOMINIC ASQUITH:

THE CHAIRMAN: ?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE:

THE CHAIRMAN:

DOMINIC ASQUITH:

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: ?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: .

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Christopher, do you want to pick the story up? When you arrived in post, Maliki had been there for a year. So did you have the same impression as Dominic ?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE:

My first meeting with him was constructive, positive. He was saying the right things about wanting to work together and was accepting the basis on which I presented our engagement, which was to help his government to make a success of Basra, and the immediate agenda was the timetable for PIC in Basra. So at the beginning there was a sort of honeymoon period in which I felt that we could work together.

But it was a stage when -- and this grew through my time there, the two and a half years -- Maliki was beginning to think ahead to elections, provincial elections, national elections.

He was clearly -- there was a strong dose of Daw'a Party interest in all the political calculations over those years.

It was also a period of progressive transition, with effective authority leaching away from the Coalition and into the hands of Iraqis, which was a process that actually we wanted, but it was very difficult to manage.

Probably you've got -- I'll stop there. You have probably got lots of detailed questions.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: It's very helpful.

Just sort of moving through quickly, perhaps you could just describe the particular view of how Britain was operating then in relation to JAM in Basra in May 2007, and then how this

changes with the Charge of the Knights.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: Well, you've had evidence in open session which related to the process of discreet engagement with the Sadrists in Basra.

We were not doing what Maliki later accused us of doing, which is taking ourselves out of the fight and essentially giving free rein to the militias in Basra, which is what he came to see as the role.

You will have seen the papers relating to this. It was an operation ███████████████ an engagement to try to achieve with the Sadrists in that context their engagement in politics, in the future of Basra, at the same time as a valid objective to reduce violence, and in particular to reduce attacks on our forces.

The underlying perception was that we were to a degree not allowing the proper interplay of Shia political forces in Basra, by being there militarily and prominently on the ground; that the Shia, and JAM in particular, needed to be persuaded to understand that we wanted the politics of Basra to be liberated, and we were genuine in wishing to complete our mission and withdraw, which was something that many suspected we were not genuine about.

THE CHAIRMAN: ███████████████████████ ███████████████?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: ███████████████████ ██████████████████████████████ ██████████████████████████████ ██████████████████████████████ █████████████████████

THE CHAIRMAN: ███████████████████████ ███████████████████████?

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DOMINIC ASQUITH:

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: After the Charge of the Knights in early April, when I had two long meetings with him over one weekend and went back over this history in detail, he acknowledged that his office had been informed.

THE CHAIRMAN: His office?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: That we had kept his office informed. He didn't dispute it -- what then was most on his mind was what he had been told by his commanders, particularly Mohan, at the time when he was besieged in Basra Palace, about our attitude to intervention at that stage,

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Quite true.

THE CHAIRMAN: Fully paid up member of the human race.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But in the end, though, with the Charge of the Knights, there was an opportunity to express those frustrations with the British that we would consider would have

a good outcome, if not necessarily undertaken in the way that we would have preferred.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: Charge of the Knights was a turning point for Iraq, a positive one. There's no doubt about that.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Charge of the Knights was no different from an operation we had proposed to Maliki, called Operation SALAMANCA, which he had turned down. It was almost identical in every respect.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: That was part of what I had tried to persuade him of in April, but that was a delicate point.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: What do you think caused the shift? Was it just his own frustration with the local Shia politics of Basra? Was that to impose his own authority on it?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: I think a number of trends were coming together at that point. I referred earlier to his progressive sense of himself as Prime Minister, the power of the office. He was a centraliser, somebody who believed in strong central government.

The Sadrists had finally left not just government, but also the UIA in September 2007. He had taken over, in a more direct way than in theory had been planned in Basra, the security authority. The way that PIC happened in a number of provinces was to set up a local operational command which was actually beholden to the centre, not to the local governor. He was hearing exaggerated reports in early 2008 about the deterioration in local security. There were some assassinations of people of consequence to him. I think if he had a long-term vision, it was that his political pitch in any national elections would have to be based on him having asserted the strong hand of government.

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The militias, particularly JAM, not just in Basra, but across the south, were a paralegal extra -- illegal force that was challenging the authority of the state and the local government, and he definitely had an ambition to do that[2].

Another trend was the progressive success of the training and development of the Iraqi army, which had by that stage reached the point where the divisions that the Americans had created were available as relatively effective tools for the Prime Minister to use.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: It was consistent with -- there was an operation in the beginning of 2007, called in Arabic Fardh al Qanoon, or "imposing the law", which took the Americans to some extent by surprise. It was a Baghdad plan, a security plan devised and carried out by the Iraqis, by Maliki and his team, which was going on at the same time as the Americans were pursuing the Baghdad security plan 1 and 2. So he had a previous record in pursuing security plans whose remit and whose timing and whose conduct he dictated.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: General Mohan had been developing a plan with us, with our local commander, with the MNF, for the assertion of authority, with the forces that had then been built up, and it was scheduled to take place later that year.

When Maliki was briefed on that plan, he said "it's too slow, too late". At that stage provincial elections were due later that year. He clearly wanted to have asserted his authority across the south in time for the provincial elections. He was not a military man.

[2] i.e. assert government authority

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When he decided to move, he had meetings with the American military command in the two weeks before the Charge of the Knights happened, or ten days, perhaps even as late as a week -- I'm not quite sure of that timing -- in which he got Petraeus' sanction for their support, MNF's support, to getting the military units down to Basra.

THE CHAIRMAN: [redacted]

?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: [redacted]

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Who actually called it Charge of the Knights? Where did this name come from?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: It's just an Iraqi military name, that comes out of a computer or perhaps somebody's mind.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: A possible description of this Inquiry.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I was going to say that.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: On your side of the table anyway.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: It has a sort of dramatic feeling to it.

Quickly moving on, just again to get a feel of Maliki's own attitude towards the military drawdown and SOFA and so on with the UK. Was he happy, at least with the drawdown, because we know there were problems with the SOFA?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: In my time, the agenda for the Da'wa[3] of the Prime Minister, for Maliki personally, was to achieve Iraqi sovereignty as soon as possible. The leitmotif from the start was: when are we going to get out of chapter VII. They had insisted, before I had arrived, in the August 2007 political statement, ahead of the Petraeus/Crocker testimony, that the renewal of the UN resolution at the end of 2007, 1723, should be the last one. That had been established and had actually been the clincher in bringing the politicians together - setting that target.

It was in that context, therefore, that drawdown of British forces was seen. But there was this contradiction, that they wanted sovereignty as soon as possible, but they were also aware

[3] the Da'wa Party

of their continuing military weaknesses and the need for the recruitment and training and deploying of their forces to go ahead with very strong Coalition role in that.

So in the end Maliki was persuaded that we had to have the extension we needed to complete the training in Basra province.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: It was a consistent problem, to go back to what I said, a consistent problem of discerning Maliki's intentions or objectives in terms of Basra, or those around him, such as his National Security Adviser. I had a particularly unpleasant meeting in March 2007[4] where at the end of it I gave him the option, do you want us out of Basra by May or do you want us out of Basra in terms that you can assume sustainably control of what we leave behind? The pitch to begin with was get out of Basra as soon as possible. Why are you taking so long? But at the end, frankly, there was confusion about what they wanted. And I don't think they ever resolved that in their minds, whether they wanted us out early, or they wanted us out, having created conditions where they could assume control. They didn't like the latter because it was going to take too long.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: What you said earlier about them wanting the results of our military engagement but not the fact that we were doing it, and the time and the means by which we did it, were absolutely true.

Maliki was never aware, fully, of the military contribution that was being made, [redacted] not only in Basra, but particularly around Baghdad.

In the run-up to the debate on the SOFA, we asked the Americans to brief Maliki and his National Security Adviser [redacted]

[4] with the latter

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SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just a final question, and then we will have a break. It all fits in with all of this. I'm just looking at your assessment of the prospects that you wrote in September 2008.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: 2007 or 2008?

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: 2008, 1 September 2008.

I'm not going to go into the detail, but there's a sense in this of overconfidence on Maliki's part, claims about where national reconciliation is, claims about the capacity of the Iraqi forces, and therefore how independent they can become of the Coalition, the Coalition more generally.

Do you want to comment on how much you really did feel -- it sort of flowed from the previous answer -- not just on the UK, but on the Coalition more generally, bound up with the question as to whether we were being picked on because I think, as Dominic was suggesting before, we were easier to pick on, or whether this reflected a general attitude towards the Coalition?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: His attitude to us was a subset of his attitude to the whole Coalition, to the Americans. He was still in 2008, when that was written, very dependent on the Americans for delivering all the support, advice, the fine tuning of all the operational planning for those post Charge of the Knights operations which he was conducting. By then he had done Sadr City. He was up in Mosul, which is still unfinished business, and he, as I said before, definitely had his eyes on the election agenda.

It was a time when Parliament and Parliamentary activity was more a part of his calculus than it had been before because Parliament, the Council of Representatives, was beginning to

develop its role.

The emerging big issue was the American Status of Forces Agreement, and indeed our own. Our concern was that with the veil of protection that the Americans had thrown over him, because of their own wish to have no interference in the negotiation of their agreement, that he felt immune. That was the layer of concern.

Maliki must have been aware that in this period, particularly as we came to the negotiation of our agreement, and more particularly the American agreement, he still needed the Americans. He still needed a basis for it, but he was going to be judged on his handling of it

THE CHAIRMAN: Let's take a break now for five minutes. Then I think we need to come back and spend just a few minutes on the general assessment of the Maliki government, before we get into some other topics.

We believe we have the noise under some control.

(A short break)

THE CHAIRMAN: Let's restart. Lawry, I think you have some general --

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just a very general question. Basically your assessment of the Maliki government's performance. You have given us some hints as to what you think. ? How did it behave politically? Just broad views.

THE CHAIRMAN: .

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: .

DOMINIC ASQUITH:

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: ?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: .

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE:

What he did achieve, largely through the Coalition help to develop Charge of the Knights into a military campaign with real momentum on a national scale, was the assertion of central government authority. I think he presided over a turnaround in

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the perception of Iraq drifting to renewed sectarian conflict, back into an Iraq that was, and still is, developing a potentially successful constitutional government. If you are looking at the overall effect, that's what he's done.

If Allawi or a third personality emerges, then Maliki, in the large view of history, may actually be the person who held a difficult office at a tricky period and actually produced a national election which led on to better things.

THE CHAIRMAN: I think we need to head on to other topics, but if there's time at the end, I'll be minded to ask all or any of you how the regional neighbours viewed the Maliki administration and Maliki personally. But let's get on to the rule of law.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Let's move on to the security sector reform. We invested quite a bit of time into building up the Iraqi army and police, in the capacity of rule of law and governance. During your time there, did you see that as your responsibility, and how much of your time did you spend on issues to do with rule of law, security and reforming the police?

THE CHAIRMAN: This runs right through.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Right through.

EDWARD CHAPLIN: If I start. It was a key objective to create the environment, an efficient and secure environment in which a political process could happen and reconstruction could happen, and there was an increasing acceptance on the American side of the reformulation of their counter insurgency strategy after Negroponte and Casey took up their jobs, that those were interlinked. You had to have a holistic approach.

So most of the burden of this fell on to the Americans of course, because it was then being run by Petraeus, building up Iraqi forces, which on paper always looked quite impressive, in practice sometimes less impressive. That wasn't just because there were problems with supply of the right sort of equipment. It was more that it's one thing to recruit and equip battalions of security forces, but it's quite another to turn them into

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an effective fighting force, and still more a fighting force that can operate on their own. That took several years, in fact.

At the time that I was there, there was, as I mentioned earlier, a constant frustration on behalf of Allawi, in his role, so to speak, of Commander in Chief, of not having enough frontline forces to do the things he wanted to do. Dominic and I both saw that. Dominic was also there at the time of the crisis in Najaf. What he wanted to do was send some forces to sort the place out. The government didn't have the capacity to do that.

There was also, it's probably worth mentioning, a certain wish to have bits of heavy weaponry to show off in the sense that he wanted parades with -- not tanks, exactly, but heavy artillery and so on to deploy, whereas the US strategy was that lightly equipped infantry battalions was what you needed.

Our own efforts, of course, were concentrated largely in the south, and also on the police side, and probably building up of the police force lagged badly behind the building up of military forces.

THE CHAIRMAN: Is that because it's inherently much more difficult, or is it the degree of effort that the Coalition was able to put into it?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Both actually. I think it was underestimated as a priority from the start, but it is also very difficult to do.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: It was also rushed initially, in that the police training that was done initially in Jordan, in retrospect, was seen to have been using the wrong human material and giving them inadequate and short training which disintegrated under the pressure of the situations they were

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being inserted into.

THE CHAIRMAN: Was the model itself fundamentally flawed?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Initially, yes. It was numbers, not capability. It fell apart in April 2004 completely, at the first test. The Coalition in the CPA days realised that it had got it wrong. It was run by the military, rather than the civilians and the police. The control was in military hands, rather than civilian police hands. So the whole philosophy of policing was inconsistent. And inherently more difficult, yes. You could train military because they stayed in barracks. They never went home. The police, after the training, went home. Their families were got at. They were got at, and they were pressured and influenced to not be loyal.

EDWARD CHAPLIN: There was also one other factor which was that we, the UK, don't have the sort of traditional policing that can transfer itself easily to an environment like Iraq, whereas others, like the Italians or the French, if they had been available, much more used to producing some armed police that --

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: One success story, I think, in the picture is the Carabinieri training of the national police, which, by the time I had left, had moved the national police force from being one of the most sectarian bodies into one of the most effective national bodies. As Edward said, there was a --

DOMINIC ASQUITH: And the ministers of the interior, at least for the first three years, regarded the Ministry of the Interior, therefore the Police Service, as their specific party preserves, often the militia of a particular party.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Was the militia infiltration rife?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Absolutely. Certainly until the time I left.

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It was rife until August 2006. One of the successes of Maliki's government was to move the Ministry of the Interior out of the hands of the Supreme Council, the Badr Brigade effectively, but the damage had been done. They were in there in every single --

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: It was part of the settlement that the militias of the mainstream parties were legitimised and rebadged.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: It was the settlement at the end of the CPA days, the Badr Brigade, the Supreme Council's militia, was legitimised, and they as a result were transferred as a militia into the Police Service.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Can I go back a bit? In terms of the policy of Iraqi-isation, you said that this is something Allawi struggled with throughout. I think you said that in one of your telegrams. Can you explain that a little bit?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Iraqi-isation? I think he struggled with not having enough Iraqi forces to deploy, as he saw it, for security and other purposes. Whether that was army or police -- I think he was principally talking about army. So he saw areas of the country that were just out of government control and where security was getting worse, and didn't have the capacity to take them on.

His main focus actually, certainly in the first half of my time there, to the end of 2004, was Fallujah. Fallujah became a sort of symbol of what I've just described, a centre for terrorist action out of government control. The government had to take control of it again. So that is what he was focused on, but there were many other problems, Samarra and Mosul and others, that he simply didn't have the capacity to tackle.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Do you think we made the right

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assessment of the capability of the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police, or did we rush the handover to Iraqis in the early days?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: This is way after my time. There was no handover.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: What point are you talking about? Are you talking about 2004?

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: 2004.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: The end of the Coalition days?

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Yes.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Unquestionably we rushed it. Not only did we rush it, but we rushed it, and the evidence, as I say, of April 2004, two months before we handed over, was a Police Service which either turned to the side of the militias or deserted their posts in 90 per cent of the cases. We had to rebuild it at that stage.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: When the Charge of the Knights happened -- we talked about it earlier -- was their performance a surprise?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: The Iraqi military's performance in the Charge of the Knights?

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: [redacted]

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: It depended. The military judgment of our commanders in Basra was that the unit that performed badly in the Iraqi army was one that had not finished its basic training. There was a part of the 14th division which was put into battle when it wasn't ready. Those units that had been fully trained, and had gone up the military progression

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sufficiently far, did well.

What they lacked in Charge of the Knights was logistic support, in particular, and good leadership. That arose from the way that, as we've discussed, the campaign, if it could be called that, or the operation, if it could be called that, was launched. It was just not planned. We were scrambling to provide them with food, water, ammunition, and keep them going. But the forces -- the formed and trained forces did reasonably well.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: In your telegram of 13 September 2007 you said that

Do you think we were realistic in handing over to the ISF in the circumstances?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: We did so in December that year, and that was on an assessment done by the whole structure, Iraqi and Coalition, to assess the capability province by province. In part it's ultimately a political judgment, but there were six criteria. I think you had evidence on this in public, on how PIC were addressed, and the boxes were ticked.

But overall the politics definitely played a part, and it was a political wish, not just on the Iraqi side, but also on the British side, that PIC should happen and that it was -- I think our instinct throughout -- I don't know whether Dominic would agree -- was different from the Americans. The Americans tended to hang on for a bit longer and wait for things to be nearer to perfection. We had an instinct or analysis that when you had trained and developed a unit, it only really was tested if it

was given responsibility. We tried not to throw people prematurely into that responsibility, but wanted to give it to them early, and I think that's a valid military judgment.

My answer is that I felt that it was politically the right time, and that I felt reasonably – with what I had heard at the time, I felt reasonably confident, come December, that the structures were there in place for the Iraqis to take the lead, which is what PIC implied. They weren't left alone. We were there in strategic support to them.

Charge of the Knights, in its way, showed that they were indeed. Had Charge of the Knights been a properly planned operation that happened as it turned out, it would have been deemed evidence that what Basra needed, which was an Iraqi-led military assertion of authority, with police and support, had been planned and delivered, and that could not have been done by a British-led operation during a period of Coalition lead.

Basra was eventually dealt with at the first moment that it became the priority, the main effort for both the Iraqi government and the Coalition. Until the moment that Maliki forced that into happening, it had never been the main effort for either the Iraqi government or the Americans, and perhaps it could not have been. Perhaps it required that concatenation of circumstances, where there was a sufficient Iraqi force, there was the political will in Baghdad to do it, and there were the Americans who were forced to divert their attention from Baghdad and the Anbar and Mosul to deliver the Coalition main effort in the south. That all happened at the Charge of the Knights, not through careful deliberate plan, but it happened, and that actually was the turning point.

EDWARD CHAPLIN: From the beginning, in fact from the Allawi time, a lot of my time was spent persuading the Americans and

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the Allawi government to pay more attention to the south, at that time a relatively benign environment, and because of that they assumed it didn't need much attention.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: It would not have been possible, but then I think the course of events in Basra would have been different.

THE CHAIRMAN: Foreshortened, rather than changed?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: I think it would not have got as bad as it did, and it would have been able to turn around more quickly.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So are you saying that politically that was a bad decision?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: PIC, at the time, was right.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Can I move on to the question of engagement with Sunnis and the issue of communities? Would you say what impact did the UK's engagement with the Sunnis have on their willingness to play a constructive role in government?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: The key period was 2005, after the first elections and before the second. I would say the effect was significant because we engaged people whom the Americans were not engaging. We were picking up people who the UN, in the form of Brahimi and Ben Omar, the previous year, had been talking to as part of the opposition, when they were talking about the Parliament, and had then been left unattended but, as I said, clearly had an influence over the insurgency.

I would point to the turnout, the Sunni turnout, in the elections at the end of 2005 as the best proof I can provide that the round of discussions

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produced over that period a persuasive argument for them that they should either participate or not obstruct the participation of Sunni Arabs in elections.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I think you said earlier that the USA were not very keen on engagement with the Sunnis. Did that have an impact on our outreach and what we did for the Sunni outreach?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: It complicated it

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Were we doing enough, do you think?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think we did enough to get them to vote in December 2005. Did we do enough thereafter in continuing that relationship? Possibly not. In retrospect, I think we thought we had done the job. We had got them in. There were a group of people then who were part of the sort of legitimate political structures. We dealt with those, which was again part of the objective, to legitimise the relationships, but there was still a deal of persuading to do with those who were deeply sceptical, suspicious, of the intentions of Central Government in Baghdad.

Getting at them would have been difficult. Persuading them that there was a future for them would have been difficult. But probably, in retrospect, we should have built on those relationships we had established. Whether it would have produced a significantly different result, I'm not sure.

THE CHAIRMAN: Did it take David Petraeus' arrival on the scene in Baghdad to unstick US reservations about it?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: No. I don't think so. I think this goes to the heart of a really important question, which I'm sure you

have had mentioned to you time and again, which is when Petraeus arrived and opened up the dialogue with the Sunni tribes of Anbar province, it reinforced for me the question whether, from an American perspective, reconciliation in their view was reconciliation between the tribes and the multinational forces, or it was reconciliation between Sunni Arabs and an Iraqi government. I think on the whole it was the former.

Petraeus' dialogue with the tribes in Anbar was largely, if not wholly, determined by a need in September 2007 to demonstrate to Congress that Iraq was not haemorrhaging still at that stage. So it was reconciliation between the tribes in the insurgency and the multinational force.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: There's a sort of parallelism, but inexact, between the [redacted] engagement and the Concerned Local Citizen Sons of Iraq in Anbar. There were two legitimate objectives. One is to defuse the conflict, get people away from violence into politics. Another is to achieve a diminution of violence against Coalition forces. I don't think they are contradictory.

EDWARD CHAPLIN: The picture -- as Dominic said, the key period for this was after the elections in January 2005, and in the run-up to the second round of elections in December 2005. I think it's fair to say we were fairly active, as much as we could be, from 2004 onwards in making sure that our contacts included Sunni rejectionists and we had had contact at various levels. I think Dominic was there in December 2004, when we had contact with one of the particular rejectionists.

It is an area where we were more active than the Americans, but also where we perhaps had a more ready audience than the Americans would have had because those rejectionists saw the whole Iraq invasion as a stitch-up between the Chalabis of this

world and the neo-cons, and as evidence they would adduce the fact that how on earth could you do something as stupid as disbanding the Iraqi army, if you were not simply wanting to impose your own pre-cooked plan.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: The Americans continued to distance themselves a bit from the process of engagement with people who were still shooting at Americans. It was helpful to them to put a British general in charge of the FSEC[5]. General Lamb's engagement was a bit maverick to start with, but had Petraeus' full support, and he recognised it had value and reinforced it. That was the basis of its success.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Can I move on to the question of Sistani? He's been mentioned as someone whose influence was central to Shia participation. How did we ensure that we understood what his thinking was, and what backchannels were used to communicate, to understand his influence?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Sistani was not someone we could have a -- no Coalition had access to him. He made sure he wasn't going to be seen to be receiving ambassadors or military commanders or

anybody else. He did talk to the UN, and we talked to a lot of people surrounding him. He had representatives in a number of places. I remember calling on his representative in Nasiriyah.

Shahrestani, who has already been mentioned, was a key figure in the political process, the particular political process after the January elections in 2005 in the three months process for forming the government.

So all our contact with him was second hand, and I think, realistically, there wasn't much more that we could do. We had to assume that the noises we were getting from people like Shakrestani reflected reasonably accurately his views, [redacted].

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: And did that continue?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Yes. There was a list of people we worked off who we knew either met Sistani directly or his son. Amongst the Iraqi political establishment there were half of dozen of those who, if we wanted to get a message through, we would go and talk to them, and either explicitly say, "This is a message that Najaf needs to hear", or, in some cases, when William Patey was ambassador, we delivered a letter to Sistani through those intermediaries. Those intermediaries either occupied ministerial positions, like National Security Adviser, or were independent politicians.

We worked, as Edward said, through his special representatives. He had one in Basra, whom I called on. It was always a bit difficult to go and call on him about a particular

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[5] Force Strategic Engagement Command

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case because we ended up having to park four Warriors outside his mosque, which wasn't exactly the context in which one wanted to have a conversation with Sistani's representative, but demonstrated the difficulty of getting the messages through.

Besides the UN, I think he also saw the EU special representative, and we used her once for getting messages through to the establishment, to the circle around him. It was a small onion, but it was a bit of an onion with Sistani: that you would talk to people who either talked to others or talked to his son or, very rarely, talked to him.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: And the purpose was what?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: The purpose was usually to explain what we were up to, to try and disabuse him of what we sometimes sensed were misperceptions on his part of what the Coalition generally, or the British in particular, were trying to achieve. The inability to talk to him direct inevitably created misunderstandings, and we used to get the sense of those [redacted] from conversations with those who talked to him or [redacted].

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: And did you think you were getting through the backchannels? Were you getting through to him?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: We suspected that the message got through. What we didn't get very often was the reaction or could gauge whether we had achieved the objective of making him discard his misconceptions.

THE CHAIRMAN: Did he, as a Shia religious leader, have the opportunity to create a 360-degree sense, through contacts outside Iraq itself, with either Arab religious leaders or indeed with politicians? Did we know? Was he at the centre of a network of contacts and communication?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: He wasn't like that. From our perception, he wasn't like that. He wasn't interested in that because he felt it not his role to do that. And the perception was he was always led unwillingly to give his view on political developments inside Iraq, and that included in terms of dealing with external people.

THE CHAIRMAN: Seeing himself not as a theocratic figure, but simply as a religious person?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: As a religious person who, come what may, he could never persuade those around him to leave him alone, and not to adjudicate on political issues.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: Theocracy in the sense of Iranian style, he would definitely have rejected.

In my time there was less cause for concern about Sistani's attitude towards us, and indeed towards political developments, because progressively he actually came to be seen as one of the more constitutional inclusive democratic national figures, whose influence was positive where it was exerted. He definitely influenced the political parties to move to an Open List system. He definitely influenced the political parties to provide for special provisions for minorities in the various election laws. He spoke up, through his representatives, for inclusivity in the political approach towards the minorities in terms of the Sunni community.

So by the 2008/2009 period he was very much a person of genuine national stature, not just a Shia religious figure.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But throughout he continued not to engage with you?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: He didn't do it overtly, but there were gradations of subtle messaging. Those who could read it would

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know when something was out of Najaf with the authority of Sistani.

[redacted]

DOMINIC ASQUITH: [redacted]

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: [redacted]

DOMINIC ASQUITH: To pick up your point in terms of the external, yes, he did have one or two important representatives outside Iraq, including a particularly important one [redacted], who again we tried to develop a line of communication with, and again it was very difficult to do so because even those were reluctant to be seen to be consorting with us.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: The only occasion during my time on which we sought to get a message through to Sistani to recruit his help was over the hostages, where he was clearly well intentioned but not necessarily able to[6].

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Before I move on to Iran and other foreign influences, I just want to ask the question on the influence of the Muqtada al-Sadr. Did we actually properly understand his evolving influence?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I'm not sure he understood. His influence? No. Did we understand it? Yes, I think we understood it in the sense that we saw the effect. But his movements, whether political or the Jaish Al Mahdi, the military side, had a varying influence throughout the whole period, depending upon the intentions and the relationship between the leadership, broad leadership, and Muqtada himself, and that often was

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dependent upon where Muqtada himself was physically located and his state of mind.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Can I just now move on to Iran and the region and foreign fighters? We heard from a number of witnesses about the threat from the involvement of Iran in Al Qaeda, and Tony Blair said that what nobody foresaw was that Iran would actually end up supporting AQ, because the conventional wisdom was that these two were completely different types of people, because one is Shia and one is Sunni, and so on. But ultimately they did actually collaborate to destabilise the country.

So during your time, what evidence did you have that Iran and AQ were working together to destabilise Iraq?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: None in my time. In my time, if I go back to the time before I arrived in Iraq, when I was Director for Middle East and visited Tehran, in that period, the Iranians were saying most of the right things, about the wish for a stable Iraq and so on, and swore blind that they were not going to interfere in the political process.

The other reason I went to Tehran was because the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, one of the main political players thereafter, was then based in Tehran.

So my perception of the time I was there, 2004/2005, was that the Iranians had certainly built up and continued to build up considerable assets in terms of political influence and the ability to get involved, including in support of militias and so on, when they needed to. But they were biding their time. I think it's probably later that you get more concrete evidence, and certainly the issue of Iranian collaboration with Al Qaeda wasn't a factor that I remember being of great concern.

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[6] i.e. to help.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: And during your time?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I may be wrong, but I thought there was evidence even in 2004 of a sort of holding or a safe area Al Qaeda used in Iran. That was a different matter. That was, I guess, a different matter from active collaboration with Al Qaeda on their operations inside Iraq.

Evidence for that was patchy, but there. It was difficult to build up a consistent picture of what the objectives were, but in terms of the communication lines from Iraq to Al Qaeda leadership, periodically -- communication and provision lines -- periodically there was evidence that emerged that it went through Iran. It went through the territory of Iran.

THE CHAIRMAN: Iraq had its countervailing interest in keeping the MEK under control, didn't it? Did it see the two as somehow part of a shared operation, a balancing operation?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: The Iranians had a huge number of assets in Iraq. There's no question. They worked at various times with other groups, besides Al Qaeda, with PKK, let alone with the various Shia groups.

So I think it was the -- I say this with all deference to Edward, who knows the Iranians better than any of us -- but I think that was keeping all the horses in the race. They would back one or other, depending on how tactically it suited them best.

EDWARD CHAPLIN: I think that's right. The other obvious point is that we are talking about Iranian policy and referring to something that is actually not very unified at all. So what elements of the Revolutionary Guards were getting up to, opportunistically with whatever group that was to hand, would be one thing, but not necessarily reflect the settled will of some government machine sitting in Tehran.

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DOMINIC ASQUITH: The Iranian hand was a peculiar one. I remember in February, early March, I think, 2007, the Americans were still -- when the Americans were in the process of giving some high profile press conferences about Iranian weapons that had been found in Iraq. They managed to give those press conferences.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE:

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Time is rushing on, but I just want to

ask one question. How would you see the ambitions of the other neighbours, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan and Turkey? Were they kind of constructive, destabilising?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: There were a variety of motives and actors there, and depending what time you are talking about -- I mean, take Turkey first. They had a particular concern about Kurdish extremism and the north, and they'd already been involved, including the troops on the ground, in the north. So in my time they were acting relatively constructively.

Iran and Syria were under deep suspicion of helping the insurgency. So although Allawi did try and engage with the Syrians, he refused to engage with the Iranians. I'm not sure we made much progress there.

The Sunni regimes as a whole, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, wherever, had from the very beginning, before the operation, been appalled at the prospect that we and the Americans were actually going to preside over the putting into power of a Shia majority in Iraq. What an earth did we think we were talking about?

So their co-operation was -- they were certainly very suspicious in the early stages, though, through a variety of processes, including neighbours' conferences -- it's one of the areas where we and the Americans engaged with regional governments to persuade them to help. Christopher has already mentioned the Jordanians setting up police training and so on. Over the period I was there, they did start to become rather more collaborative. There was the Sharm El-Sheikh conference as well in November 2004. This was all about -- it was part of the UK effort to help gather international support for the new Iraq.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I would only add one sort of anecdote on that, or one vignette on that,

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: The perception of Maliki and others, which they tried to and continue to try to substantiate, is that the Saudi interference and Syrian interference is as bad as the Iranian interference, that there was some sort of equivalence. There's clearly not.

It is a fact that 50 per cent of the foreign fighters that were channeled in were Saudi nationals, on the American analysis, and that 90 per cent of them came through the Syrian border.

In the eyes of Maliki, et cetera, this was evidence that the

The double explosion in Baghdad, which led to Maliki's accusations of direct Syrian government support in late 2009, just shows how tense underlying relations are there.

THE CHAIRMAN: Rod?

SIR RODERIC LYNE: I would like to rattle through four areas quite quickly in the next 20 minutes or so: the Kurds; hostage taking; relations with the Americans; and the interplay between diplomacy, intelligence and military in all of your time. So let's just take the Kurds first.

How much effort did we invest in trying to get the Kurds to play a constructive role in the political formation of Iraq, and to what extent were our efforts effective in that area?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: It was a constant. They were key players. They were much the best organised. They had the most organised military forces.

We had already engaged, of course, way before the time of the invasion, through the various things, since shortly after the First Gulf War, and we also knew quite a lot of the key players, some of whom were resident in London. Zebari, the Foreign Minister, was the one I knew best. We kept up a relationship with them through the Embassy in Ankara, a representative who visited them regularly. So of all the different factions in Iraq, they were probably the ones we knew best.

We were also aware of this constant tension between the Kurdish wish -- emotional wish, really -- for independence for Kurdistan, and the reality of their recognition that that was not something that the rest of Iraq or the international community or the neighbours was going to allow.

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Nevertheless, they had their obsessional points, for example over Kirkuk, and their hardheaded economic interests over oil, and they fought quite hard and reasonably skillfully to make sure that those interests were preserved as far as possible.

That meant that at certain stages in the political process, including, for example, just before the elections in January 2005, we had to intervene quite a lot to ensure that they didn't derail the process. There was a particular issue, I remember, over the threatened boycott of the provincial elections in Kirkuk which, as I say, was one of their obsessional points, reversing the ethnic cleansing that had been done by Saddam Hussein. An issue which is still unresolved.

So I think we were reasonably successful in keeping them pointing them in the right direction in terms of their support for elections taking place on time in January 2005.

But they were constantly playing games. For example, in the formation of the government from January 2005, for a long time they were trying to do a deal whereby Allawi would be in the government, if not actually Prime Minister, and were holding out against any other solution. In the end they did give way, but it could be quite difficult sometimes.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Never forget the relationship between the Kurds and the Shia in Saddam's day, where they both felt that they had a kinship or brotherhood in opposition to Saddam, and they never forgot that.

As a result of the three-legged stool in Iraq, these were two legs which were always going to be standing up in one way or another, even if the Sunni Arab leg disappeared periodically. And they would play each other off, very cleverly -- they would play each other's strengths off against us very cleverly in the Kurdish context, ensuring they retained their autonomy, whether

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on the security side with their own forces, the economy over all, or constitutionally in terms of federalism, against a Shia desire to remain in a predominant position in Baghdad.

The way they handled the Coalition to ensure that those two separate Kurdish and Shia interests were pushed forward all the time in any debate, any discussion with us, was a consistent feature of the political game going on in Baghdad. They each had their own interests, and they each pursued them relentlessly and very intelligently.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Christopher, when you left, did you feel that the Kurds were securely part of Iraq for the future?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: I felt that Masood - Talabani certainly, but Masood with less certainty, but most probably - had done the political calculus of the Kurdish self-interest. Very crudely put, a 17 per cent permanent share of the whole wealth of Iraq, supported by the international community, was better than a beleaguered 100 per cent of the resources of the region that they could retain, and that was a judgment that they had made.

But converting that strategic judgment into a consistent positive engagement in helping the further development of that sovereign Iraq was very difficult. In the catalogue of things that the last government of Maliki did not achieve, an oil law, constitutional reform, settlement of the relationship between the centre and the region, the funding of the Peshmerga, Kirkuk; all these are issues on which the Kurds had at least a generous share of the blame for failure.

One would hope that this prolonged period of government formation now is not just about personalities, but is actually about what policies the next government is going to pursue on those key issues, and that will be the real test.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: The most collegiate, the most Iraqi

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nationalist of Kurds one could ever meet, the Deputy Prime Minister for a long time, Barham Salih, would still admit -- I think he has probably admitted to all of us -- that even if you scratched him,

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: It's not something they would renounce, but pragmatically they are engaged in.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Edward, can I move on to hostages, which you gave evidence in public on, so I don't need to go over that again. But can I just ask in private, because obviously how we handle hostage cases involves very sensitive issues

I think, specifically on the case of Margaret Hassan -- Kenneth Bigley was somebody not known to the embassy before he was discovered to have been kidnapped and we discovered there was a British citizen there, but Margaret Hassan was somebody well known to the embassy, and the embassy was in touch with her husband.

Two questions. One, looking back on this horrifying case, and very unjust case given her standpoint, do you with hindsight think there's anything more that could have been done in the way that we handled it to prevent her murder? And after the event, you and indeed your colleagues, is there more that could have been done to try to locate and recover her remains? Are there any other lessons that you would draw from the way that this case was handled?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: In a sense, and not trying to duck the question, I'm the wrong person to ask because, although, of course, I was ambassador during the time of both those horrific cases that ended so badly, the process, as you know, when you have a kidnapping case is to put someone else from the embassy

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in charge, in this case my deputy, Jamie Bowden, who gets a lot of support flown out from London, negotiators, investigators and so on, and is instructed separately from a group in Whitehall which was chaired by David Richmond at that time.

So although I anticipated the question, and I had a look at what papers were available, actually there's very little in the archives of the Iraq Inquiry about either of those cases.

But from my memory, was there anything more we could have done to prevent her kidnap and murder? I think Margaret herself, who I knew from before -- I knew her when I was ambassador in Jordan as the representative of CARE Australia. She used to come through Amman on her way to Baghdad. So we had occasional contact with her while she was also in Baghdad. I think she thought precisely because she was so well integrated into the Iraqi community and had an Iraqi husband, and was a woman, that she was somehow exempt from the other security concerns.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Yes, that was a decision she took. Once she'd been kidnapped -- I don't think there's anything more that we officially could have done to prevent her kidnapping, but once she had been kidnapped?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Well, I don't know. It would be difficult to reach a judgment without going through all the details of the various meetings that were held to consider the case. My impression was that we did everything we reasonably could. At my level that involved contact with everybody from the President and Prime Minister downwards, plus any party leaders who might be able to throw light; devising ideas about how the Muslim Council of Great Britain came out, produced interlocutors who might get a better response than we would as British diplomats; running a publicity campaign to try to turn up some information.

All those things were done.

Could they have been done, more intensively? I don't know. Probably. Would it have produced a different result? I doubt it. I think the evidence that emerged was that it was probably a criminal gang that had taken her, and at what point they transferred her on to someone else who actually murdered her and why, I think, is still very obscure.

So although I'm sure the family think we should have done more, I'm not sure that in practice, having thought about this, I can identify anything more specifically that we should have done, though as I say I'm not the right person to ask.

As to the investigation afterwards, again, I suppose the truth is there's a limit to the amount of resources you can devote to just one part of that picture, important as it was, obviously, for her family, either the Bigley case or the Margaret Hassan case.

I think any lead that we had from time to time was followed up pretty promptly. There was the discovery by the MNF of a place in Fallujah where there was some indication that perhaps Bigley had been held there. I think that was followed up pretty promptly.

There was the discovery of Margaret Hassan's belongings. Was that towards the end of 2004, I think? No, it was later. It was May 2005, just before I left, which again was followed up promptly. Four members of the Metropolitan Police were dispatched to Baghdad to assist the Iraqi Police who had arrested the four Iraqis who had been discovered in possession with these things, and I don't know what became of that. It was after my time.

So, again, I can't really give a very definitive judgment on whether there's more that we could have done to locate her remains. All I can say is that, as far as I know, every lead

that came our way was followed up reasonably promptly.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you. Dominic, Christopher, the aftermath, the search for the remains, was still a live issue in both of your times.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Margaret Hassan?

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Yes.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I don't think -- I can't think of anything we could have done differently. It seemed to me that we were following -- how do I put it -- the established process of handling any hostage case. We observed it and followed it.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: One of the suggestions that her sisters make now is that they have had evidence of where they may be buried that has not been followed up. Now, of course, this is not a risk-free process and the evidence is not very specific. Do either of you know anything more about this, or are you really not the right people for us to be putting this question to?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I do not know anything about it.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Christopher?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: By the time I was there, the main hostage effort was on the larger case of our five hostages. This case went really off the screen. It does only ring a very slight bell, this question of the claim that there were opportunities still to follow up. I was not involved in it. So I was aware of it, but I think that we assessed that it was not actionable information.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: I would like to move on now because time is pressing. We could spend a very long time on the relationship with the United States, but we don't have infinite time.

I would really like to focus on what you all found were the

difficulties or the tensions, or the absence thereof, in the necessarily very close relationship that we had with the United States in this theatre, having been the two Coalition partners that went in there as the lead partners, not the only ones, and really bearing a joint responsibility, albeit unevenly distributed in terms of power and effectiveness.

Are there broad lessons that you would extract from that about how we work with the Americans in theatres of this kind? But rather briefly, I'm afraid.

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Right. The area we could probably write a book on is in the lead-up to the war, leading back to all that impact of the UK in trying on get the Americans to think --

SIR RODERIC LYNE: I can assure you that we've looked at that in a lot of evidence already, and therefore --

EDWARD CHAPLIN: In theatre, I mean, certainly in my time, it was pretty close and worked pretty well. Of course there were occasional tensions, sometimes just caused by the chaotic US bureaucracy. They controlled, for example, the security of the international zone, and getting practical arrangements done that involved the American security machine, was sometimes difficult.

But in terms of the relationships, which is what it comes down to in the end, whatever the institutional machinery that's in place -- the relationship between Casey and General McColl and Kisley, Brims in my time, the relationship between me and Negroponte, although Negroponte had disappeared around March, I think, and there was a gap before Kalilzad turned up -- were frequent and close and there wasn't too much hidden from each other. I think they were very -- certainly in American terms, very open.

For example, in the early days after Negroponte arrived, he and Casey had this sort of team brainstorming to revisit their

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counter insurgency strategy, in which they included us. Both military and intelligence and myself took part in these meetings, which produced a more coherent comprehensive strategy. So that speaks to the amount of trust they had in us and their eagerness to hear our views.

It was also helped by the fact that -- the relationship was helped by the fact that we helped out with the deployment in North Babil at the time of Fallujah. That was quite a significant help, and quite difficult for us in terms of the casualties that we took. Then later on the fact that we were on these missions that came to revisit the whole question of the support for the new government -- the Jones and General Wall, or whatever his name was, missions -- also shows that we were very much inside the tent.

I think the one area where we had most difficulty was extracting sense from the development side, the development experts, and getting enough sense of what they were about, and influencing their priorities, even in the re-allocation of the $18.4 billion supplemental, and in particular getting enough of that down to the south where we could see that it was needed.

So that was probably the scratchiest part of our relationship. But overall in our time it was reasonably smooth, and certainly very, very close contact. No question of it.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Very good relationship. Influence reflected the disparity in the contributions we made. As the Americans said, you want 50 per cent of the decision, or 50 per cent of the influence, on 2 per cent of the resources that you've devoted, compared to the whole. I think it was always, I have to say, in retrospect, unrealistic to expect the influence, the good relationship to be transformed into an influence that was of the level that our political masters would have liked.

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I think, secondly, that it was unrealistic, given the level of American contribution to Iraq, to expect us to be able to influence decisions by the Americans that were fundamentally and repetitively taken with a view to their own domestic politics.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: And we didn't ever introduce domestic politics into our decision?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I would have completed that sentence by saying that every single Coalition partner had their own domestic politics to deal with. The Americans just had a bigger domestic policy problem -- their domestic politics was of greater influence, given the size of their contribution. So it was swamping others. But of course you are right.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Chris?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: In my time, the relationship between the key Americans, Petraeus and Crocker, was extremely close and effective, and I think that was part of the reason for the turn-around in the effect, the joint effect, that the Coalition was able to have on developments. Excellent relations with both of them.

Their attitude by the time I was there to us was that they definitely wished to preserve our participation in the Coalition. They sensed -- they weren't so explicit about it, but they sensed a wish in London to draw a line under Iraq and to get our forces out as soon as possible, and they suspected somewhat a rush to draw down ahead of --

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Are you being very diplomatic there? Because there was some quite sharp criticism voiced about the speed at which we departed Basra. Did that come across your radar screen?

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: That was more the commentariat in the

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States, rather than in theatre. Petraeus is a very political general. Crocker is political to his fingertips. He understood the political realities for us, and also they had their understanding of the rising demands from Afghanistan and other theatres.

They, in Iraq context, were looking ahead to their own strategic plan for eventual drawing down. The necessary way-station for them certainly was their strategic agreement and the Status of Forces Agreement. They wished to help us achieve a similar respectable exit. They wanted that for themselves. They still want that for themselves. And in terms of responding to our political needs on the ground, there was very good co-operation.

When it came to giving us privileged insight to their private negotiations and the state of their very difficult engagement with Maliki and his team on their own agreement, we had absolute access which we needed on the ground.

When it came to the effort to persuade Maliki that he needed to provide the legal base for us to extend beyond the end of the UN, they also engaged helpfully to get across to Maliki what it was that we were still delivering on the ground in practice for his forces which he needed to allow us to do.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Sorry to rush you on all of this because there's a lot more we could discuss, but I suppose the bottom line from what the three of you have said is no major complaints about the way that we were handled by the Americans in this period, even within the privacy of this room, which is a much

more private environment than our public witness sessions.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: Well, in Basra, Petraeus just occasionally revealed his irritation that what he called OPM, other people's money, was what we were deploying. The Americans were funding the vast majority of the PRT effort. The British contribution to the economic initiatives, which our Prime Minister made such a lot of, was puny compared to the 100 million a year - I think that's roughly the total - which the Americans allowed us to claim to deploy.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Okay. Finally from me, and again more briefly than ideally I'd like,

Did the three of you feel in your respective periods that we had an appropriate division of labour between the diplomatic, the intelligence, and to some extent the military ? Was it well co-ordinated? ? Or did at some points in this long period silos arise in which we weren't having as seamless a policy as one would ideally have?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Well, I think, again, it's less about -- certainly in my time, less about institutional structures and more about the personalities and the relationships between them, which in my time were pretty good.

SIR RODERIC LYNE:

EDWARD CHAPLIN:

There was a similar picture, really, on the military side,

The fact is we were usually flat out, usually on sort of firefighting duties, as well as trying to push forward all the other things we were trying to do, and there wasn't time for institutional squabbling or preciousness, and I don't think there was any of that. So I have no complaints to make.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Very good personal relationship throughout all the time,

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THE CHAIRMAN: We have about one minute left.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: Excellent engagement

I was impressed by the SIS.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: I'm afraid there's no time for final recollections. We have got to 2010. Just a one-word one. Has it all been worth it, given where we are and where it may go?

EDWARD CHAPLIN: Too soon to say, probably. I think you heard

my final remarks in the first public evidence session. To sum it up, really, it[7] was inevitable, but we should have handled it better. I take the long view that it did a good thing.

DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think one of the rare occasions where I would echo Tony Blair's words, which is I think we are better off without Saddam.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: When you say rare occasions, that would mean the other arguments he has used, you would question?

DOMINIC ASQUITH: Some of the judgments.

CHRISTOPHER PRENTICE: I'm out on a limb as an Iraq optimist. But the early months of 2010 have had to qualify that. But I still feel that Iraq has a better than even chance of giving a unique kick to positive political developments across the region.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you all very much. I'll close the session at this point, sadly curtailing it. Transcripts to be reviewed in this building as and when convenient to yourselves. Thank you very much indeed.

(The hearing adjourned)

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[7] i.e. military action