

Monday, 25 January 2010

(2.00 pm)

RT HON DES BROWNE MP

THE CHAIRMAN: Good afternoon.

RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Good afternoon.

THE CHAIRMAN: Good afternoon and welcome everyone. This

afternoon, we are taking evidence from the

Rt Hon Des Browne MP. You were Secretary of State for

Defence from May 2006 until October 2008, I think.

RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I was, yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We are going to ask questions

about policy decisions taken during your time in office

and about the implementation of those decisions in Iraq.

Mr Browne was Defence Secretary during a period when

the security situation was very severe in 2006 to 2007,

and we will be asking about the United Kingdom

government's response to this. We shall also be asking

questions about the subsequent move in the autumn of

2007 of the UK military from Basra City to consolidate

at Basra airbase and about the policy of overwatch that

was then adopted.

Now, I expect we will take a break at about

3 o'clock and to go on until about 4 o'clock in this

session.

We recognise, and I say this on each occasion, that

1 witnesses are giving evidence based in part on their  
2 recollection of events. We, of course, cross-check what  
3 we hear against the papers to which we have access, some  
4 of which are still coming in.

5 I remind every witness that he will later be asked  
6 to sign a transcript of his evidence to the effect that  
7 the evidence given is truthful, fair and accurate.

8 With that, I'll ask Sir Lawrence Freedman to pick up  
9 the questions. Sir Lawrence?

10 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you.

11 Mr Browne, when you became Secretary of State  
12 for Defence in May 2006, what was the Prime Minister's  
13 advice, instructions, whatever, to you? What did he say  
14 to you about Iraq that he thought needed doing most?

15 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, you first of all have --

16 I think should remember that my early days were  
17 dominated by an event in Basra. I was the Secretary of  
18 State, I think, for just over 24 hours. It was a Friday  
19 into a Saturday, and the Lynx helicopter was shot down  
20 in Basra and we lost five personnel.

21 So that was an early introduction for me and  
22 a salutary introduction into the risks that our troops  
23 were running and the consequences of that for families  
24 and others, and the nature of it -- I mean, I drew a lot  
25 of conclusions, early conclusions, from that experience

1       that I had, but the overall strategic approach to Iraq,  
2       when I was appointed as Secretary of State, was quite  
3       fixed. We were, at that stage -- and the Prime Minister  
4       explained this to me -- in a process of conditional  
5       transfer of responsibility for security to the Iraqi  
6       authorities.

7       The Prime Minister explained to me what that meant,  
8       the conditionality that was associated with it -- and we  
9       may go into that in some detail at some stage later --  
10      and it was very clear to me, and, as I came to know and  
11      understand the detail of the job, that it would be my  
12      responsibility in the wider strategy to deliver the  
13      military part of that.

14     SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: You rightly remind us of the  
15      dreadful events with which you started, and in general,  
16      during your time in Iraq, casualties were very severe.  
17      This was some of the worst times in terms of losses.

18      Did you find that conditioned your approach or did  
19      you in some senses have to sort of steel yourself in  
20      terms of pushing on with the strategic objectives,  
21      knowing full well that there would be more deaths and  
22      injuries of the sort that you had experienced right from  
23      the start?

24     RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I think I would say that, in that  
25      sense, I had the benefit of a very realistic appraisal

1 of the environment that we were operating in and what  
2 the likely progression of that would be, in terms of  
3 violence, by those who advised me and who had a very  
4 clear understanding, and it proved to be correct.

5 I point out that early on in my term of office in  
6 late May, I made a speech, I think, at RUSI and  
7 I subsequently made a speech at Chatham House -- these  
8 are in the public domain -- in which I spelt out the  
9 strategy, and part of that was to explain publicly, in  
10 terms of our communication of the strategy, that we  
11 anticipated that, as we withdrew our troops from Basra,  
12 then the militia and others who were there would seek to  
13 take credit for that and they would do that by  
14 increasing the level of attacks on our troops.

15 You have also got to bear in mind that this was in  
16 the aftermath of the Al Askari shrine event, and Shia  
17 violence and militia violence was increasing in any  
18 event, and it peaked at quite a significant peak not  
19 that long after I became the Secretary of State.

20 So -- but interestingly -- and my recollection of  
21 this, and my reading in anticipation of this evidence  
22 reminded me that my recollection is correct -- over the  
23 30 months that I was the Secretary of State, we stuck to  
24 that strategy. It did not divert us from the strategy.  
25 You asked me the effect -- I think it is well-known,

1       because I made no secret of it, that I found it  
2       difficult to come to terms with the death of our people  
3       in the operational environment. I had no military  
4       experience. I hadn't the benefit of military  
5       experience, which helps people to cope, I think, at the  
6       strategic level, and I found it difficult to personally  
7       to deal with the losses of our people in the operational  
8       theatre, and I became focused, I think rightly, on our  
9       people and their families and on our support for them  
10      during the time that I had this awesome responsibility.

11     SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think we may want to ask you some  
12      more questions on that particular aspect. Amongst  
13      your colleagues in government, what did you sense was  
14      the view of Iraq now? Was this something that had  
15      become a bit of an embarrassment for which they would  
16      like to get out of as quickly as possible, or was there  
17      still a sort of feeling that, whatever had been done in  
18      the past, somehow this had to be brought through to as  
19      good a conclusion as possible?

20     RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I think more the latter. I mean,  
21      I think by the time I became the Secretary of State  
22      for Defence, I think I can say with some confidence  
23      that, by and large, people's positions about our  
24      intervention in Iraq, about the war in Iraq, were fixed  
25      and I had no sense, over the time that I was Secretary

1 of State for Defence, that I ever changed anybody's mind  
2 about the rightness or wrongness of it, about the  
3 legality or otherwise of it. My sense was that we had  
4 a responsibility.

5 I had a particular responsibility, which I took on  
6 voluntarily, in terms of being the Secretary of State  
7 for Defence, and we were in Iraq in all of the time that  
8 I was there, I think I can say -- in all of the time  
9 that I was there in the context of the United Nations  
10 Security Council Resolution. So we were delivering --  
11 I was responsible for delivering, but in the wider  
12 context, I accepted shared responsibility for that; the  
13 development of this country and its governance and its  
14 ability to look after its own security, and latterly  
15 I became involved in a whole list of other things,  
16 including economic development and (inaudible) and so  
17 did the troops that we deployed. But all in the context  
18 of the United Nations Security Council Resolution.

19 So positions were fixed. There was no great  
20 discussion in government of the nature that you  
21 described. It was: we had this responsibility and we  
22 had to deliver on it, and I was clear what I had to do.

23 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: When the Prime Minister asked you to  
24 take up your position, he also asked you to take  
25 responsibility for co-ordinating all UK efforts in Iraq?

1 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: He did, yes, and I accepted that, and  
2 indeed there is a -- there was a document -- I mean,  
3 I wrote back to him accepting this responsibility and  
4 describing how I would seek to try and deliver that.

5 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I'll just come back in a second to  
6 what you said in that document. Who had been doing this  
7 before?

8 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't know the answer to that  
9 question, to be honest.

10 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Were you surprised that it was the  
11 Defence Secretary, rather than, say, the Foreign  
12 Secretary who had been given this job?

13 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: When I came into the job, I had no  
14 previous detailed experience of that area of government,  
15 in which to make that sort of judgment. I mean, clearly  
16 our military operations sat in the context of a wider  
17 strategic objective, which was owned by all of  
18 government, and I mean, I know what other people have  
19 said when they were in office, where they felt the  
20 overarching strategic responsibility lay in government,  
21 but I was content to accept it, bear in mind, I think  
22 when I became the Secretary of State, we had in  
23 excess of -- would it have been 7,000 troops in Iraq? We  
24 had by far the greatest number of people there and we  
25 were spending a significant amount of resource there.

1           So it didn't strike me that, since I had a great  
2           number of very senior people on the ground, that being  
3           asked to co-ordinate this across government was --  
4   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Perhaps you could just tell us how  
5           you went about this. How did you co-ordinate? How did  
6           you report back to the Prime Minister? What were your  
7           main objectives?  
8   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I mean, the paperwork which you  
9           have seen, if you have seen all that I have seen, shows  
10          that -- apart from anything else, I mean, I was in Iraq  
11          nine times over the course of the time that I had  
12          responsibility for, as Secretary of State for Defence,  
13          and the reports of those visits to Iraq were  
14          comprehensive, in my view, in the sense that they  
15          covered, not just the military aspect, but -- I mean,  
16          I met the leaders of every part of Iraqi politics.  
17          I was in contact with every department of their  
18          government that had shared responsibility with us for  
19          delivering, and I met regularly those who represented  
20          the coalition.  
21          I mean, MND (South East) was truly multinational  
22          when I came the Secretary of State for Defence. I think  
23          there were 12 countries in total there at one stage.  
24          There were eight by mid-2006. There was an established  
25          process of weekly ministerial operational meetings.



1       They didn't take place every single week, but they took  
2       place most weeks and they are noted, there is  
3       a significant amount of paperwork for them. The other  
4       departments who shared the responsibility, FCO and DFID,  
5       attended those meetings and I regularly reported to the  
6       Cabinet, and then, of course, there was the structure  
7       and government of officials. There was a strategic  
8       group of officials who reported through the structure  
9       that I have indicated. All of this, of course, to what  
10      was DOP(I) and later became NSID.

11     SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: DOP(I), I think, met  
12      in October 2006. Did that establish a sort of goal for  
13      Iraq?

14     RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The strategic approach, as far as we  
15      were concerned, never really altered. It was fixed. We  
16      were in a position of transition and the transition  
17      involved provincial Iraqi control of the provinces that  
18      we had responsibility for.

19      The process was established. In fact, the process  
20      was proved comparatively shortly after I became the  
21      Secretary of State for Defence, in that Al Muthanna was  
22      transitioned to provincial Iraqi control, as  
23      I recollect, in July. I think Dhi Qar was two months  
24      later in September, Maysan in April 2007.

25      So by the time DOP(I) met, we had already proved

1       this process with two. But Basra was, of course, the  
2       key and Basra was a different kettle of fish from the  
3       others. Of course, it could be said also that Maysan  
4       was, Maysan was a very particular province, sitting, as  
5       it did, on a border, most of which was underwater and  
6       which the people that lived in that border had not, for  
7       centuries, paid very much attention to.

8               So it was a particular province, but it didn't have  
9       the same challenges as Basra did. So by the time DOP(I)  
10      met in October, we had already proved that process.

11     SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: As you say, when you start moving on  
12      to Basra, you have got a much more substantial problem  
13      on your hands and there is a question, I think, around  
14      all of this as to whether -- how much of a desirable  
15      end-state you could actually achieve before you left or  
16      would it be necessary for British forces to leave when  
17      not everything was as we would wish.

18     RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't think anybody who ever  
19      advised me -- and I became like this too -- was anything  
20      other than completely and utterly realistic about that.

21              All of this strategy operated in the context of  
22      a very difficult situation in Iraq, where there was  
23      a diversity of security challenge across the country,  
24      and for reasons to do with the state of the alliance  
25      between the Sunni militia and Al-Qaeda, around about

1 Baghdad and in Baghdad and in the west of the country in  
2 particular, and because of the nature of the violence,  
3 which I'm quite prepared to discuss with you in some  
4 detail, between the Shia in the south and the -- the  
5 circumstances that I inherited -- there was an increase  
6 in this violence.

7 But we were very clear that this Shia violence in  
8 the south-east -- and I have explained this on many  
9 occasions and indeed in both of these speeches that  
10 I have already referred to very early on -- was  
11 a competition for influence and resources in the south,  
12 and it was influenced by Iran, but we were very clear  
13 that it would be a combination of Iraqi politics and  
14 Iraqi security that would deal with that, that there was  
15 no way that the coalition forces could deal with that in  
16 a sustainable fashion. There had to be an Iraqi  
17 solution.

18 Now, if you further complicate that by the fact that  
19 the Iraqi Prime Minister, I think, had been appointed by  
20 a matter of days when I was appointed the Secretary of  
21 State for Defence after a significant period of time,  
22 following the election, he was in the process of  
23 building his government and his government was an  
24 alliance, it was a coalition, and, frankly, that  
25 coalition included the Sadrists, and the JAM militias,

1       who were a significant malign force at least at one  
2       level in Basra, were part of the general political area  
3       of the Sadrists, they were a manifestation of the  
4       Sadrist movement. Moqtadr Al Sadr, who was their  
5       leader, was, on occasions, in and out of the country,  
6       but all of this development of this process complicated  
7       the environment in which we lived, but we were very  
8       clear there had to be the building up of the Iraqi  
9       forces and the maturity of the Iraqi politics that would  
10      deal with that sustainably, and, actually, that proved  
11      to be the case later on, but we will come to that.

12     SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you, but let's just be clear,  
13      the situation in Basra, as you became the Secretary for  
14      Defence -- I mean, we heard from General Shirreff, when  
15      he was here, that, when he arrived in July, we could  
16      only put 200 soldiers on the streets of Basra City of  
17      1.3 -- we have had estimates of anything up to 3 million  
18      people. Nobody seems to know. There was a cycle of  
19      insecurity. The militia effectively controlled the  
20      city. So that our position was extremely tenuous in the  
21      summer of 2006 in Basra.

22     RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I mean, our position -- I'm -- I'm  
23      not in a position to recollect precisely those figures,  
24      but I don't question those figures, because I'm not in  
25      a position to do so, but we were, at that stage -- and

1 I repeat -- planning to, in fact, remove our troops  
2 progressively, and we did, from Basra. That was because  
3 there was an appreciation -- and I repeat this  
4 appreciation, because it was conditioned into me by  
5 people who knew and understood this and I was persuaded  
6 by it.

7 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: What sort of people are we talking  
8 about?

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Those who advised me. I mean I was  
10 given comprehensive briefings.

11 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: This is officials and so on?

12 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Not just by officials, but by a whole  
13 series of GOCs, including General Shirreff, I have to  
14 say, in Basra itself on my regular visits.

15 The people on the ground, their analysis of it was  
16 that this was a Shia competition. It was self-limiting  
17 violence. There was an influence of the Iranians and it  
18 was the engagement of the Iraqi politics -- and I spent  
19 a lot of the time drawing the attention of the growing  
20 Iraqi Government to the nature of the issue in Basra and  
21 the importance of their contribution to resolving it.

22 It was at the point at which the Prime Minister felt  
23 that his political position was secure enough and his  
24 military effort would be good enough to deal with it.

25 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: That was some way ahead.

1 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: But that was the point that we were  
2 trying to get them to, and progressively, and you have  
3 to understand we were making a significant contribution  
4 to that in training the 10th Division and then  
5 subsequently the 14th Division of the Iraqi army, but  
6 that was a progression of circumstances.

7 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: The 10th Division were problematic  
8 in all of this.

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, the 10th Division were  
10 problematic to an extent, but the 10th Division were  
11 also a significant success. The 10th Division --

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But not in Basra.

13 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: -- deployed in part to Baghdad to  
14 support the American surge and they got a catalogue of  
15 positive critiques from very senior battle-hardened  
16 American generals who worked with them.

17 So there was a problem that we identified, and  
18 I don't think this is -- there is any secret about this.  
19 There was a problem that we identified in the  
20 10th Division about where they were recruited from and  
21 the ability of the militia to be able to intimidate  
22 their families.

23 That was why, not that long before the Charge of the  
24 Knights, we agreed that the 10th Division should look  
25 after the provinces other than the province of Basra,

1 and the 14th Division came down into Basra, but that was  
2 a progression of the overall stage as we learned and  
3 understood what was happening on the ground and the  
4 effect of the militia on those soldiers that we were  
5 training.

6 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But the basic problem was that, in  
7 order to be able to leave Basra, we needed a degree of  
8 security in Basra that we ourselves were unable to  
9 provide. It could only, in the end, be provided by the  
10 Iraqis, by this stage.

11 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The additional problem, of course,  
12 was -- and we predicted this and there is a specific  
13 paragraph that I'm prepared to draw your attention to in  
14 my speech of 2006 spelling this out. We knew that, as  
15 soon as we said we are planning to leave, the militia  
16 would increase the attacks upon us, and, indeed, about  
17 90 per cent of the attacks at one stage -- I may be  
18 slightly exaggerating that, it may have been only  
19 80 per cent, but a very substantial proportion of the  
20 attacks that were taking place in Basra were on us.

21 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Because they wanted the kudos for  
22 chasing the British out?

23 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: They knew what we were planning to do  
24 strategically, but, in the kind of open democracy that  
25 we live in, there is no alternative but for people like

1 me to answer questions in Parliament and other places  
2 and to the media explaining what we are seeking to do.  
3 We have to communicate our strategy to those people whom  
4 we are accountable to here, and, once we put our  
5 strategy, then the enemy will respond to that, and  
6 I spelt this out. I said that we can expect that this  
7 will happen and that's exactly what did happen.

8 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But the position as we were in, in  
9 the middle of 2006, when Maliki has only just taken  
10 over, you are having to hope quite a bit that Maliki is  
11 going to take on this problem of the militias.

12 Did he give you a commitment early on that he was  
13 prepared to do so?

14 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The Prime Minister regularly gave me  
15 undertakings that he would instruct that resources, both  
16 military and other resources, would be devoted to Basra.

17 However, his machinery of government was not always  
18 capable of delivering that, and he had the additional  
19 problem, of course, that the Provincial Council in Basra  
20 at the time, which again was an elected body, was -- did  
21 not function properly on occasions.

22 My perception, the then governor was a malign  
23 influence who was associated with the complexity of the  
24 local politics which was tied up with the militia.

25 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So the basic problem through 2006



1 is, though you can see the way forward and you have  
2 indicated that things did turn out not too badly in that  
3 regard, as they were then, there was very little upon  
4 which you could base any optimism, given the  
5 configuration of political forces and the role of the  
6 militias?

7 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: You are questioning me about Basra,  
8 but we still had responsibility for a rather large part  
9 of Iraq, and we were delivering, you know, on the  
10 strategy, the process was working in Muthanna, Dhi Qar,  
11 Maysan, to the extent, in fact, that our overwatch of  
12 Maysan subsequently was very successful at the point at  
13 which the militia in Al-Amarah attacked the authorities  
14 there, and we stood by effectively and overwatched while  
15 the local politics sorted that out. So the process was  
16 proved to work in the overall environment. There were  
17 particular challenges in Basra and we had to work our  
18 way through them.

19 Now, we responded to them with the resources that we  
20 had, you know, as best we could, and I spent a lot of  
21 time in Iraq, and in government here, ensuring that --  
22 or trying to ensure that the relevant supportive  
23 resources, both from the Iraqis or from our coalition  
24 partners, were made available to us to be able to get  
25 through the time that we needed to allow for the

1 development of the forces who would eventually be able  
2 to deal with it and to allow for the maturing of the  
3 political structures in Iraq which would eventually deal  
4 with it as well by negotiation.

5 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Were you advised that more British  
6 military resources/troops were going to be needed to  
7 bring the situation to a satisfactory one?

8 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't recollect at any stage --  
9 I do remember one occasion, and I think you have heard  
10 evidence about this, that we deployed the reserve, but  
11 we would periodically deploy the reserve in the context  
12 of the RIB in any event, in the context of the change,  
13 but we deployed the reserve, I think, at one stage, if  
14 I remember correctly, in the context of  
15 Operation Zenith, which was the operation which  
16 stretched throughout almost all of 2007 about this  
17 transition for Basra, but I don't remember at any time  
18 being asked to find extra troops or -- I don't remember  
19 being asked to find extra troops.

20 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So you were essentially content to  
21 work within the framework that you had of the number of  
22 troops there and all the effort was really into getting  
23 the Iraqis to step up so that they could take  
24 responsibility for the security situation?

25 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I mean, I'm reluctant to concede to

1 a leading question that uses the word "content". This  
2 was a difficult environment to work in. It was  
3 a difficult environment to work in, but I, in a sense,  
4 kept my eye on the ball all the time. I knew what was  
5 needed to come together to have any prospect of  
6 a sustainable resolution of the nature of the violence  
7 in Basra.

8 I didn't come to this job with this understanding.  
9 This understanding grew in me very quickly from the  
10 briefings I received, principally from military people,  
11 and their analysis, which I enormously respected and  
12 still respect.

13 Now, there were occasions when we had to put our  
14 foot on the brake, there were occasions when we could  
15 move forward. There were occasions when we had to look  
16 to our coalition partners for some sort of support, and  
17 it wasn't just the Americans, you know, we had other  
18 coalition partners, including the Danes and the  
19 Italians. I was in constant contact with our coalition  
20 partners as we adjusted to try to create the optimum  
21 opportunity for the development of the resources that we  
22 believed would deal with this issue.

23 So contentedness was never a word that, you know,  
24 was -- would have described my state of mind at any  
25 time. This was a constant state of considering the

1 tactical circumstances, taking advice, supporting our  
2 people on the ground, doing some quite difficult and  
3 radical things on occasions, all towards the objective,  
4 which came about, I think, rather prematurely, actually,  
5 in March 2008, but we may come to that in a moment, I'm  
6 not anticipating. It came about rather prematurely,  
7 but, even then, we were able to respond, and all against  
8 the background of a very difficult communications  
9 environment of -- particularly a communications  
10 environment in which there was no -- there was no  
11 appetite for an explanation of the building of Iraqi  
12 capacity in terms of --

13 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: You are talking communications in  
14 the UK or in Iraq?

15 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Absolutely here, and the effect that  
16 that had on the families of those people whom we  
17 deployed. So contentedness, I wouldn't describe myself  
18 as being content at any stage.

19 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I want to hand over to Sir Roderic,  
20 but just before --

21 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't mean to interrupt you, but  
22 can I try to answer what I think was the implication of  
23 the question?

24 We had a limited amount of resource and, of course,  
25 in 2003 -- sorry, we made decisions in relation to

1       Afghanistan as well and we only had one army. So we had  
2       a limited amount of resource and I had to operate within  
3       the restraints of that limited amount of resource.

4           So I mean, I accept that there were limitations on  
5       what we could do, but I say now, and I am confirmed in  
6       this view, having re-read acres of paperwork, that it  
7       wouldn't have mattered to some degree what we did in the  
8       interim. The challenges that the people of Basra faced  
9       would not have been dealt with in a sustainable fashion  
10      until the combination of those two factors came  
11      together; that is the Iraqis' military or security  
12      capability and their political leadership.

13   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think this is a very good point to  
14      hand over to Sir Roderic.

15   SIR RODERIC LYNE: As you rightly say, we only had one army  
16      and the question of Afghanistan was coming up. I just  
17      wondered if I could ask one or two questions about the  
18      interplay between Afghanistan and Iraq.

19           Just to recap, I think before you came into office  
20      on 5 May 2006, a decision had already been taken,  
21      although not yet implemented, to make a significant  
22      increase in the number of troops we had in Afghanistan  
23      from about 1,000 to 5,400. If we just look at the way  
24      the numbers run over the next year or two, that meant  
25      that in late 2006 we still had 7,100 in Iraq, according

1 to the data we have been given. Afghanistan had gone up  
2 from 5,400 to 6,300 by late 2006, and then, looking  
3 ahead into 2007, Iraq goes down 5,500 to 4,500, while  
4 Afghanistan continues to go up 6,300 in April, 7,800 in  
5 late 2007.

6 We heard from Geoff Hoon the other day, your  
7 predecessor but one, that in July 2004, he had taken the  
8 position that it was necessary for us to reduce our  
9 commitment in Iraq before taking on increasing  
10 commitments in Afghanistan.

11 Now, obviously, that was two years previously. By  
12 the time you come into office, as I say, the first  
13 decision had been taken. What advice were you hearing  
14 from the military about the impact on them of increasing  
15 Afghanistan's numbers at a time when we were still in  
16 very large numbers in Iraq?

17 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The decision to deploy forces into  
18 Helmand province in particular in Afghanistan was  
19 a decision which I was party to. I mean, there was  
20 a group of ministers which became known as the  
21 Reid Group because John Reid chaired it, which, over  
22 a period of months, considered against the very  
23 significant constraints and conditions that John Reid  
24 put on what needed to be satisfied before we would  
25 deploy our forces into Afghanistan, whether we were able

1 to do this.

2 I was, at the time, the Chief Secretary to the  
3 Treasury, so at the end of the day, from the point of  
4 view of access to the reserve, I had the responsibility  
5 to ensure that we had the resources to be able to  
6 support that financially.

7 So I mean, I was privy to that process and that  
8 grouping met regularly. In fact, I think latterly, if  
9 I remember correctly, on a weekly basis, and reported to  
10 the Cabinet. Now, I heard -- well, I read of  
11 Geoff Hoon's evidence. I mean, I have no recollection  
12 candidly, you know, of Geoff Hoon expressing that  
13 position, but I wasn't around in 2004. So if -- I can't  
14 speak for that, but what I do know is -- and I can't  
15 recollect and I did not have access to the documents to  
16 be able to ascertain the specifics of this but John Reid  
17 was very clear that he would not take to the Cabinet  
18 a recommendation that we deploy into Afghanistan unless  
19 the Chiefs of Staff -- unless the military advice was  
20 that we were able to do that with the resources that we  
21 had.

22 Now, that wouldn't be the specific wording of it,  
23 but he will remember them, I think, much more clearly  
24 than I do. I came into the Ministry of Defence in the  
25 knowledge that the military advice was that these two

1 operations were sustainable with our resources.

2 That, of course, became a great focus of  
3 Parliamentary accountability and public observation on  
4 the time that I was the -- when I was the Secretary of  
5 State, and it was constantly discussed at the highest  
6 level in the department with the Chiefs of Staff.  
7 I think the Chief of the Defence Staff, on one occasion,  
8 described the army as "running hot", but that it was  
9 do-able, and I made perfectly clear that I recognised  
10 that we were using our resources to their limit, and  
11 that that position would be unsustainable.

12 I have to say one of the learning processes that  
13 I went through as the Secretary of State for Defence was  
14 the counter-intuitive learning that, if you deploy  
15 people in operations, you destroy your capability rather  
16 than maintaining it. That wasn't, to me, as a person  
17 with no military experience, very clear at first, but  
18 I came to understand what they meant by that, and  
19 I said -- and I think there is lots of public record of  
20 this -- that, "I understand that we are stretching our  
21 resources, and that, if we sustain this, then we will --  
22 we are in danger of doing damage, but that we do not  
23 intend to maintain this", and that's what proved to be  
24 the case.

25 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Some of the generals who have already



1 given evidence have perhaps gone beyond "running hot"  
2 and simply that it was damaging the time to recuperate,  
3 retrain and so on, and really have suggested that one  
4 was having to make priority decisions between Iraq and  
5 Afghanistan. General Cooper, for example, said:

6 "We can't pretend that Afghanistan didn't have an  
7 impact on force levels in Iraq."

8 General Shirreff:

9 "A decision had been taken to open up a second front  
10 in Afghanistan before the situation in Iraq was  
11 satisfactorily resolved:"

12 Whereas he said:

13 "A winning strategy was going to require significant  
14 additional resources."

15 General Houghton talked of the need to rebalance in  
16 order to regain strategic coherence in Afghanistan.

17 Now, you quoted the advice of the Chief of Staffs  
18 that were given to your predecessor when he presented  
19 the decision to Cabinet. Was there a recognition that  
20 this did mean that some of the effort in Iraq would  
21 suffer from increasing the troop numbers and the  
22 equipment going to Afghanistan?

23 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: There is no doubt that Afghanistan  
24 had an impact and it increased pressure on a finite  
25 level of resources. My responsibility was on the advice

1 of the military to manage that against a long-term  
2 strategy, which would see the numbers in Iraq reducing,  
3 which was fixed in any event and was not related to the  
4 fact that we were deploying troops into Afghanistan and  
5 we did a significant number of things to do that.

6 I mean, there was particular pressure on certain  
7 trained personnel whose deployment and the repetition of  
8 their deployments were in breach of what was believed to  
9 be an acceptable in terms of maintaining their skill  
10 base and proper relationships and, you know, their  
11 families.

12 I have to say -- and I can say this confidently --  
13 at all stages I took and accepted the advice of the  
14 military on these issues. I realise there was  
15 a difficulty and there was a challenge. I'm equally not  
16 conscious that there were things we did not or could not  
17 do, particularly in Basra or in Iraq, because we had  
18 troops deployed to Afghanistan.

19 Individual GOCs will use their own vocabulary to  
20 describe what they were seeking to do, but I never had  
21 any sense from any military person who advised me that  
22 the strategy for MND (South East) would be a winning  
23 strategy. It was a strategy of transition.

24 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Just two more questions on this, if I may  
25 and then I think we should move on.

1           Did you feel that it to some extent increased the  
2           pressure on you and on the generals to achieve the  
3           transition within the timetable set, even if the  
4           conditions for that were not what you ideally would have  
5           wished?

6   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, no, I didn't, and I think I can  
7           point to examples where we, as I said earlier, put our  
8           foot on the brake because circumstances on the ground  
9           didn't allow us to do what we had planned to do.

10           I mean, the best example of that is that we  
11           maintained our force level at 4,000 in the immediate  
12           aftermath of the Charge of the Knights when we clearly  
13           had a plan to reduce our force level to 2,500, and we  
14           put that into the public domain.

15           So we were in a constant environment where people  
16           were demanding from us in a conditional environment some  
17           timeline, resisting that timeline, but giving as much  
18           information as we thought would give people, and  
19           particularly the forces, some indication as to what was  
20           happening, and then being criticised for not meeting  
21           these alleged timelines that we had avoided giving.

22           So, in fact, the opposite is the case. Where we  
23           felt the strategic environment or the operational demand  
24           required that we do not press ahead with something that  
25           we had planned to do in optimum circumstances, we didn't

1 do it. So I didn't feel under pressure and I never at  
2 any stage am conscious of having removed resources from  
3 Iraq in order to deploy them to Afghanistan.

4 I am conscious, however -- and this became much more  
5 acute in relation to helicopters after I demitted  
6 office. I am conscious that resources that had been  
7 used in Iraq were subsequently deployed to Afghanistan,  
8 but I never came under any pressure from the military or  
9 from any political source to draw down our troops in  
10 Iraq because of pressure from Afghanistan. I tried, as  
11 far as I possibly could, mindful of the fact that we  
12 have only one army and that we have only one pot of  
13 resources to make decisions about both operational  
14 environments based on the needs of those operational  
15 environments.

16 SIR RODERIC LYNE: My final question on this subject: did  
17 you feel at all that the combination of Afghanistan and  
18 Iraq left you with, perhaps, not enough of a reserve,  
19 should the situation in Iraq deteriorate and you need to  
20 reinforce there?

21 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: We were part of a coalition in Iraq  
22 and we were part of a coalition with the biggest army in  
23 the world, the best-resourced army in the world that has  
24 tens of thousands of troops which it proved it could  
25 deploy once it made a decision.

1 I had a very strong personal relationship with the  
2 secretary, with Bob Gates, the Defence Secretary. I had  
3 good strong personal relationships and professional  
4 relationships with General Petraeus and with those who  
5 commanded those [troops]<sup>1</sup>. I never believed that if we got to the  
6 situation that we needed that sort of response, that we  
7 would be left.

8 So actually, to be honest -- and maybe this is an  
9 omission on my part -- I never concerned myself about  
10 that, although I did know that we had -- and I have  
11 explained earlier -- that we did, in fact, deploy the  
12 reserve on occasions in Iraq in my time and we did the  
13 same thing in Afghanistan. So there wasn't a great deal  
14 of additional resources, but in the context of Iraq, we  
15 were in a very significant coalition.

16 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you.

17 THE CHAIRMAN: Usha?

18 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Mr Browne, I would now like to move  
19 on to look at the US and the UK policy at the end of  
20 2006 and the beginning of 2007, because it was  
21 in December 2006, the Baker-Hamilton report, the Iraq  
22 Study Group Report recommended the beginning of a phased  
23 withdrawal of US troops, and it also discussed the  
24 possibility of the need to divert troops from Iraq to  
25 Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Word in square brackets added, for clarification, by witness during the process of checking the transcript.

1           Was this report in line with what your American  
2           interlocutors were telling you in the last month of  
3           2006?

4   RT HON DES BROWNE MP:  It is a very specific question, and  
5           I have to say that I would be -- I would be, to  
6           a degree, guessing about precisely that time.

7           My strong recollection of that time when the  
8           Baker-Hamilton report was published, was that the  
9           American administration and the American military  
10          leadership said, "We will take some time to consider  
11          this and we will give a considered response", and my  
12          recollection was that that's what they were saying to me  
13          as well, because I think there may well be, you know,  
14          public recording of me being interviewed about this at  
15          the time, in which I said, "That's what they have said  
16          they will do, and I think that's a very wise thing for  
17          them to do".

18          So my recollection was that they were playing their  
19          cards very close to their chest.  They had the  
20          Baker-Hamilton Report and they said they would take some  
21          time to consider this.  So they weren't telling me  
22          anything separately from what was being published.  
23          That's my recollection.  I will have to go back  
24          specifically and check at the time, I hadn't anticipated  
25          that question.

1 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you were not really aware of what  
2 they were thinking? You were aware of the  
3 recommendations but you were not aware of what they  
4 might do about it?

5 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I wouldn't expect to be a party to  
6 their analysis of this. I would expect that they would  
7 be consistent to the posture that they already had and  
8 to what we had agreed to do with them in strategic and  
9 in operational terms, and consistently they stuck to  
10 that.

11 Can I just say that one of the constant challenges  
12 I faced was that there were many people who were telling  
13 me regularly what the Americans thought? Most of them  
14 were not Americans, and many people were telling me from  
15 commentators, interviewers and others, that: if you do  
16 this, the Americans will never live with this.

17 It was never my experience. My experience was that  
18 the Americans were very open and they were very  
19 understanding of the difference, the nature of the  
20 different violence that we faced in Basra from what they  
21 were facing in areas that they had responsibility for.

22 It wasn't difficult to explain to people like their  
23 Defence Secretary or to General Petraeus or to any of  
24 the senior American officers that I had to deal with,  
25 General Odierno or others, what we were doing and why we

1       were doing it, and they were very supportive, in my  
2       experience, all the time.

3               So there wasn't this divergence, nor was there  
4       secrecy. They had their own domestic politics, and, if  
5       you remember exactly where their domestic politics was  
6       at that stage, it would have been entirely inappropriate  
7       for me, a minister in our government, to be seeking to  
8       intervene in their domestic considerations of these  
9       issues. What I had to make sure is that we had  
10      a certainty that they would stick to what they had  
11      agreed to do with us, and they did.

12   BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Coming back to the Baker-Hamilton  
13      Report, did this report actually influence our strategy  
14      of phased withdrawal and diversion of troops to Iraq --

15   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I think probably -- sorry.

16   BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: -- from Iraq to Afghanistan?

17   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I'm sorry, I think it may well have  
18      been the other way round. We were in a position of  
19      phased withdrawal and transition before the  
20      Baker-Hamilton Committee even started considering, and  
21      I'm sure they drew on -- in fact, if I recollect  
22      correctly, they may well have made reference to what we  
23      were doing in their report, but I can't remember the  
24      detail of it at this remove well enough, but my sense  
25      was it was probably the other way round, in terms of we



1           had this model which they drew on and were advancing.

2           Of course, as it turns out, that's not what the

3           administration did but, it wasn't a case of their

4           thinking was influencing us.

5   BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But in the end, of course,

6           President Bush went down a different route entirely?

7   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: He did.

8   BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: He decided to surge rather than draw

9           down the troops. Was this a surprise to you?

10   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: No, I don't think it was a surprise

11           to me, because this was a very deliberative approach

12           and, candidly, as I recollect, there was quite a lot of

13           speculation, and with all forms of government nowadays

14           in democratic societies, there was quite a lot of

15           speculation, informed or otherwise, and briefing going

16           on, so the idea that they might reject the

17           recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton Report in fact was

18           pretty much in the public domain before it was

19           announced.

20           So it wasn't really a surprise to me, apart from

21           anything else, but, if you are asking: was I briefed on

22           it by Americans? No, I wasn't briefed on it by

23           Americans until a comparatively short time before it was

24           announced.

25   BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: What impact did that have on our

1 strategy and our planning?

2 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, the first thing, of course, it  
3 did was it put us in a contrasting position with the  
4 Americans and immediately allowed commentators to say  
5 that we were doing it wrong.

6 We then had to devote energy, as we periodically had  
7 to do to energising our principal coalition partner to  
8 say, "No, they are not doing it wrong. They are in  
9 a different position. Listen to us if you will not  
10 listen to them".

11 So, as in many areas of communication, we had to  
12 divert resources, as it were, from the priority, which  
13 was doing on the ground to addressing again the  
14 communications issue, explaining why that was important,  
15 and getting people like General Petraeus, who knew and  
16 understood this on the occasions when he visited here,  
17 to make a point of explaining what his view was, which  
18 he did, because he understood it. But it had no effect  
19 on changing the overall strategy.

20 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you didn't consider increasing  
21 our troops at any stage?

22 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: No.

23 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: This was never recommended to you by  
24 the commanders on the ground or by the Americans?

25 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I have to say the contrary, actually.

1       The contrary. My advisers were saying to me, "You need  
2       to understand that this -- while this is -- or it may  
3       prove to be the appropriate thing to do, because of the  
4       nature of the violence which the Americans are facing  
5       and the coalition partners are facing in the area around  
6       Baghdad and, you know, Anbar province and in the west  
7       have, this is not appropriate for us".

8           There was a significant increase in violence right  
9       across Iraq, but about 80 per cent of the violence was  
10      in four provinces, and those four provinces, 80 per cent  
11      of the -- they measured the violence by the attacks.  
12      80 per cent of the attacks were in four provinces and  
13      they were all in the Americans' area of responsibility.  
14      About 3 per cent, they estimated was in MND (South East)  
15      and 2 per cent of that was in Basra province itself.

16   BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: We heard from General Shirreff that  
17      the UK strategy was an exit strategy rather than  
18      a winning strategy. Would you agree with that?

19   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I'm not being pedantic about this,  
20      but this is just not the phraseology I would use.  
21      I have already said earlier, nobody advised or briefed  
22      me when I became the Secretary of State for Defence,  
23      that what we were trying to do in Iraq was to win a war.  
24      What we were doing by then was we were trying to -- I'm  
25      repeating myself now, but help the Iraqis to cope with

1       this diverse and difficult environment that is Iraq and  
2       is a result of decades, if not centuries, you know, of  
3       violence in that diversity, and in a way that they could  
4       take responsibility for it.

5               So I never at any stage thought that we could win  
6       the war against the insurgents or the militias. Nobody  
7       ever suggested to me that that was a possibility. In  
8       fact, almost every conversation I ever had about  
9       insurgency with a senior military officer or  
10      a strategist started with the phrase:

11             "This cannot be won by military means."

12             We were about creating and holding the space that  
13      was necessary for the Iraqis to develop the capability,  
14      both politically and in security terms, to be able to  
15      run their own affairs. So I mean, I respect  
16      General Shirreff enormously. He chooses to use that  
17      vocabulary, but it is not vocabulary I would use.

18   BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you are saying that when Prime  
19   Minister Blair said, "It is not so much what we want to  
20   do in Basra, but what we want Basrawian people to do so  
21   for themselves ..."?

22   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: We were in a coalition, but the most  
23   important partners in this coalition were the Iraqis  
24   themselves. They had had a democratic election. They  
25   are a sovereign country. They had a sovereign

1 government. It was a frustration to me on occasions  
2 that they were a sovereign country and that they had  
3 a sovereign government and that they would make  
4 decisions which would be a change of what they may have  
5 said to me they would do before, but it was  
6 a manifestation of where their politics was at the time.

7 But I also was pleased that politics was working,  
8 because I believe in politics, and it was difficult and  
9 frustrating and it didn't follow, you know, a linear  
10 timeline, and there were lots of blips in it and there  
11 were occasions when they would not deliver on what they  
12 said they could because the politics couldn't deliver.

13 So -- but they were the important people.

14 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: You did say earlier that this was  
15 a question of transition and making sure the Iraqi  
16 institutions were working well. Do you think that we  
17 were working at the right sort of pace or were we  
18 actually rushing? What's your assessment in terms of  
19 timing and the way the transition was managed?

20 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: There were lots -- there was lots of  
21 consultation going on. You know, we had some  
22 exceptionally high quality ambassadors in Iraq who were  
23 in constant conversation with the Iraqi Government. We  
24 had the senior British military officer in Iraq, who was  
25 the number 2 to the American coalition commander. So we

1 had people at the highest level, who were in constant  
2 conversation at the highest level, and we, at the  
3 provincial level in Basra, Maysan, Muthanna province and  
4 Dhi Qar, when we had responsibility for it, were  
5 constantly in conversation with the political  
6 leadership, not just the local governments, but the  
7 opposition and other people who would engage with us.

8 Part of the problem we had in Basra was as  
9 a consequence of the Jamiat police station  
10 in September 2005 before the Provincial Council  
11 boycotted us, and we found it difficult to engage with  
12 them for most of the time that I was the Secretary of  
13 State for Defence.

14 So I have no sense that we were driving this. Can  
15 I say to you my constant recollection is that the Shia  
16 politics was encouraging us to go faster?

17 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you are saying that we were  
18 responding to the pressures on the ground?

19 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Yes, we always were conscious of the  
20 environment that we were living in, the capacity of the  
21 Iraqis to be able to do it -- to achieve what needed to  
22 be achieved, the leadership of their military or the  
23 police force or whatever, and if the implication of your  
24 question is that we transitioned too quickly in relation  
25 to what they wanted, then the opposite was the case

1           actually; we were quite often saying to them, "We need  
2           to go a wee bit more slowly here".

3   THE CHAIRMAN:  Is it fair to say -- in essence, I take you  
4           to mean, in fact, the thrust of Shia politics,  
5           particularly in the south in Basra province, was running  
6           ahead of the Iraqi military readiness to accept full  
7           responsibility?  General Mohan had his own sense of  
8           timing and would be advising Prime Minister Maliki on  
9           that.  Is that fair?

10  RT HON DES BROWNE MP:  Absolutely.  We planned to do a form  
11           of what happened in Charge of the Knights, but we  
12           planned to do it many months later, but clearly  
13           Prime Minister Maliki made the decision that the optimum  
14           time to do it was when he did it in March.  It proved  
15           politically to be correct and he knew his own politics,  
16           but militarily it was a challenging environment.

17  THE CHAIRMAN:  And risky?

18  RT HON DES BROWNE MP:  There was an element of risk in it,  
19           absolutely.  There was an element of risk, but there is  
20           no doubt that those risks were managed by responses from  
21           us -- from the Americans, who brought down certain  
22           resources and brought down mentors with them, and they  
23           also brought other equipment with them, but it was also  
24           managed by the politics.

25           I'm not privy to the discussions that took place,

1 but I am in no doubt that it was partly managed by the  
2 politics among the Shia, and I have no doubt that there  
3 were consultations with the Iranians, because they had  
4 an influence. I don't know what happened precisely  
5 because I wasn't privy to those discussions, but the  
6 politics were very important.

7 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: The United States, the coalition  
8 were actually supportive and working with us?

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I never had any sense, at any time,  
10 that the people at the strategic level that I operated  
11 with didn't understand or support what we were seeking  
12 to do.

13 That's not to say that you will not be able to find  
14 in documents observations from people lower down the  
15 chain of command, expressing views about the British  
16 army's performance or what they were doing or what --  
17 whether the strategy was right or wrong, but at the  
18 level that I operated and the people that I was involved  
19 with, I never had any sense of that, and I can point --  
20 you know, in public record, to many occasions when  
21 Americans articulated here in London or in Baghdad, and  
22 sometimes in Washington, their support for what we were  
23 seeking to do, and I had discussions with senior  
24 Americans throughout the time that I was Secretary of  
25 State for Defence in which they said they were doing the



1 same things in some provinces.

2 They transitioned a significant number of provinces

3 when we were doing what we were doing. So we weren't

4 the only people, you know, who were handing over

5 responsibility to the Iraqis.

6 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: I think we will just do a very small number

8 of questions before the break. So I'll ask

9 Sir Martin Gilbert to pick up the questioning.

10 Sir Martin?

11 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: You have spoken to

12 Sir Lawrence Freedman about the challenges in Basra and

13 I would like to take you back, if I may, briefly

14 to June 2006 shortly after you became Secretary of State

15 for Defence, when the Basra Security Plan was developed.

16 The objectives of the plan were to remove the -- as

17 it was put, the immunity and impunity with which the

18 Governor of Basra of whom you have spoken, was providing

19 patronage for the assassination squads, and also to

20 target the rogue Jaysh Al Mahdi leadership, and finally

21 to target and reform the corrupt police agencies.

22 Can you tell us how the Basra Security Plan was

23 devised and what resources were required for it.

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The Basra Security Plan was developed

25 in the operational environment because it was an

1 operational plan and it was -- I have no doubt that it  
2 was developed in the context of the resources that were  
3 available.

4 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Were the discussions about the  
5 resources coming in your time or had they already been  
6 determined?

7 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't, at that time, have any  
8 recollection of being asked for additional resources.  
9 I have to say I do not have any recollection of ever  
10 being asked for additional resources or additional  
11 troops or additional support when it wasn't given.  
12 I have no recollection of refusing any request that was  
13 ever made, but I don't specifically have any  
14 recollection, Sir Martin, of being asked for additional  
15 resources at that time for that plan.  
16 Of course, that plan was of limited success in terms  
17 of its deployment and it subsequently became  
18 Operation Sinbad, but the limitation on their ability to  
19 be able to deliver against those objectives was  
20 a political limitation.

21 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: I move on to Operation Sinbad. Again,  
22 I suppose, the same question arises. This was a plan  
23 for a series of short pulses to improve security in  
24 Basra. Again, what did you understand was needed in  
25 terms of resources to make Sinbad a success?

1 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I was briefed regularly in  
2 anticipation of what became Operation Sinbad. It wasn't  
3 originally called Operation Sinbad, but we went -- what  
4 became Operation Sinbad, and I was briefed throughout  
5 the time of Operation Sinbad as it progressed through  
6 the city of Basra.

7 The specific resources -- I mean, I have no  
8 recollection of any additional specific resources being  
9 asked for, but -- my suspicion is -- and I'm sure that  
10 the documentation will bear this out -- that the  
11 resources that would have been deployed at the RIB would  
12 have been designed to deliver. But it wouldn't  
13 necessarily be the case that every single request, you  
14 know, through PJHQ up to the chiefs for a particular  
15 piece of resource, would come to me, but I have no  
16 recollection of anybody saying, "We need significant  
17 additional resources to do this", and, therefore, my  
18 sense is that the troops that were deployed would be  
19 deployed to make the best use of the resources that we  
20 had to deliver this plan, which was already, you know,  
21 in the offing.

22 It changed quite significantly, however, the plan,  
23 in September, from those objectives to something less  
24 than those objectives in terms of security, and the  
25 reasons it changed was because the Prime Minister

1           indicated that he would not support some of the  
2           consequences in terms of detentions.

3   SIR MARTIN GILBERT:   Prime Minister Maliki?

4   RT HON DES BROWNE MP:   Prime Minister Maliki, yes.   Maybe  
5           I should be clear.

6   THE CHAIRMAN:   I think, throughout, the reference has been  
7           in this session to Prime Minister Maliki.

8   RT HON DES BROWNE MP:   Yes, I mean, we're not talking about  
9           politics and the Prime Minister.   That was the  
10          environment we were working in.   I mean, our  
11          Prime Minister was not determining, but  
12          Prime Minister Maliki was very hands-on, for very  
13          obvious reasons which I fully understood.   He was very  
14          hands-on about how we deployed our forces in an area  
15          where he had a significant political interest, and the  
16          future of Iraq, as he saw it, could be affected by what  
17          we did.

18   SIR MARTIN GILBERT:   So was it, in a sense, the inability to  
19          pursue Sinbad to a successful conclusion that led to  
20          Zenith, the decision to pull out of Basra from  
21          Basra Palace and to move to the airport?

22   RT HON DES BROWNE MP:   They didn't happen in sequence like  
23          that.   I mean, we planned -- this is very unmilitary,  
24          but we planned to sweep through the city and clean it  
25          up, effectively, and we had a particular objective to

1 try to clean up the police. So we were -- we -- in  
2 certain parts of the city intended to move into the --  
3 the police were having a malign effect on security, and,  
4 indeed, may well have been, in our view, making up many  
5 of the death squads that were operating. So we planned  
6 to move through the city and clean up the police, and  
7 then, having done that, we planned to move into  
8 Operation Zenith.

9 So Operation Zenith wasn't a consequence, it was, as  
10 I recollect, a progressional, because there was this  
11 process and then we were going to move into  
12 Operation Zenith. The intention was that we would  
13 improve the situation to the optimum that we could,  
14 subject to the political direction of the government,  
15 and then we would move into a process of transition and  
16 that the Iraqis would come and put security presence  
17 into the city.

18 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: So finally, what actually determined  
19 the timing of Zenith, was that, again, an Iraqi  
20 political decision as much as ours?

21 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Zenith started, as I recollect it,  
22 about January 2007 before Sinbad concluded.  
23 Operation Sinbad was in its later phases and then it  
24 moved out into the outskirts of the city, as it were,  
25 and Zenith started in about January.

1           So they were planned to work like that, and indeed,  
2           I think there was a change of GOC. Jonathan Shaw may  
3           have come in and taken over the final stages of Sinbad  
4           and started Zenith.

5   SIR MARTIN GILBERT: This was essentially an  
6           Iraqi Government desiderata?

7   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't want to leave the impression  
8           at that time Iraqis were telling us what to do, but they  
9           were, on occasions, telling us what we couldn't do, you  
10          know, and that's entirely correct because they were  
11          a sovereign government and it was their people. You  
12          know? So they were putting limitations on how we could  
13          deploy our forces in their country, and we accepted that  
14          because that was part of the process of the development  
15          of their politics and their confidence in their  
16          politics.

17          So the question you asked me doesn't account for the  
18          complexity of the environment we were in. We were in  
19          a coalition, there were constant discussions going on.  
20          I mean, we were constantly consulting with our allies,  
21          not just the Americans, but others -- the Danes, you  
22          know, were there in significant numbers in proportionate  
23          terms for them and they were involved with us.

24          So there was a constant process of discussion going  
25          on all the time, and we had General Mohan and

1 General Jalil eventually, who were deployed with us and  
2 on an everyday basis working with us. So we weren't  
3 waiting for them to tell us what to do. They were  
4 putting plans to them, discussing them with the  
5 coalition, discussing them with the government and they  
6 were making their contribution to it.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: I think it is time for a short break. We  
8 will break for about ten minutes.

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Thank you.

10 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

11 (3.06 pm)

12 (Short break)

13 (3.16 pm)

14 THE CHAIRMAN: I'll ask Sir Lawrence to reopen the  
15 questions.

16 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: You mentioned the issue of  
17 helicopters in an answer to Sir Roderic in terms of the  
18 competition for resources of Iraq and Afghanistan.

19 Would you accept that, even before the commitments  
20 to Afghanistan, there was concern already being  
21 expressed that we simply didn't have enough helicopters  
22 to perform the military tasks that we had set for  
23 ourselves?

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Yes, there was concern being  
25 expressed.

1 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: How severe would you say was the  
2 problem? What was the gap between what we needed and  
3 what we had?

4 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: People would always say to me in the  
5 Ministry of Defence that -- you have to understand that  
6 operational commanders could always use more resources,  
7 and to a degree, and quite a significant degree, and I'm  
8 sure even the Americans, who appear to have limitless  
9 resources, planned what they can do because of the  
10 resources that they have available, and I --  
11 I recognised the importance, and the increasing  
12 importance, of helicopters from the point of view of  
13 secure transport, and the more the threat -- the nature  
14 of the risk adapted and changed -- and it did change  
15 quite dramatically in the time that I was Secretary of  
16 State for Defence -- the more important it became for us  
17 to be able to move in the air as opposed to on the  
18 ground.

19 But the -- so my focus was not on trying to fill  
20 a gap, my focus was on trying to maximise the  
21 helicopters, and, also, at the same time, the protected  
22 mobility that our troops had, so that they could do more  
23 than they were doing, or do it safer.

24 So I can't answer your question in those terms, but  
25 what I can say to you is that not long after I became



1 the Secretary of State for Defence, we identified,  
2 sourced effectively 6 Merlin helicopters that the Danes  
3 had on order, that they were prepared to allow us to  
4 buy, and I made a decision about Chinook helicopters  
5 that we had, which had been equipped in a very  
6 sophisticated way for our Special Forces, but had never  
7 flown, about stripping out that sophistication, and  
8 turning them [into more basic versions]<sup>2</sup>. We are only now seeing the  
9 benefit, as it were, of those decisions because of the timeline that  
10 it takes to get those deployable and to train the crews  
11 in order to fly them.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think it is this timeline that is  
13 really quite important. Can I quote to you from the  
14 Public Accounts Committee of February 2005, which is  
15 obviously before you have taken over:

16 "As regards the number of helicopters, there remains  
17 an alarming gap, 20 per cent or 38 per cent, depending  
18 on how it is measured, in the number of helicopters  
19 needed and those available. The department ..."

20 And this is the key thing:

21 "The department is no longer proposing to fill this  
22 gap and this will potentially increase risks, including  
23 the risks of overstretching equipment and pilots."

24 So my point is that it was well-known that  
25 a decision had already been taken -- we have discussed

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<sup>2</sup> Words in square brackets added by witness, in checking transcript, as clarification.

1 with Mr Hoon some of the background to that decision --  
2 not to make provision for helicopters in the future, and  
3 so what you are describing is a situation where you come  
4 in with two operations underway and you are having to  
5 resort to expedience, Merlin helicopters, changing the  
6 role of Chinooks so that they come out of storage, in  
7 order that we can start to cope. It is not a very good  
8 state of affairs, is it?

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: That's a very leading question --

10 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: It is indeed.

11 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: -- which is quite complicated.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Not really. I mean, there is  
13 a decision not being taken.

14 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, Sir Lawrence, I was not party  
15 to, nor was I in the part of government at the time that  
16 those decisions may or may not have been taken.

17 Now, there was no part of my time spent reviewing or  
18 analysing those decisions. What my focus was was on  
19 finding the resources that we needed to support our  
20 troops in the operational environment. We -- we were in  
21 a situation where the nature of the attacks upon our  
22 troops changed in a very crude but sophisticated fashion  
23 quite dramatically. That required that we use the  
24 resources that we had available and identified other  
25 resources in order to respond to that.

1           So my focus was on: how can we get more helicopters?  
2           How can we identify and source somewhere in the world  
3           vehicles which we can up-armour, that we can use in this  
4           operational environment and can protect our people much  
5           better?

6           Now, I mean, you quote a particular committee  
7           report. I'm very pleased to be able to say that, in May  
8           of 2009, the National Audit Office issued what  
9           I consider to be a very balanced report -- it was after  
10          I had left the department -- about what I was  
11          responsible for and what people did subsequently, and  
12          what Paul Drayson did, in order to respond to that  
13          environment. So -- that's what my focus was on. You  
14          are inviting me to comment really --

15       SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: You are in a very difficult  
16          situation with two major operations on, and -- just to  
17          look at particular consequences, as you have indicated,  
18          one of the problems, if you don't have helicopters, is  
19          you have got to move on the ground, and if you have got  
20          to move on the ground, then you are very dependent upon  
21          the vehicles you have got -- and this is where the whole  
22          Snatch Land Rover issue comes in -- and you have  
23          indicated, as the improvised explosive devices got more  
24          sophisticated, the greater problems we had.

25          So there are real consequences of past decisions,

1           and I accept that you are not responsible for them, it  
2           is how they impact on you trying to do your job.

3   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I lived in the environment that  
4           I inherited, yes. Am I in a position to make a kind of  
5           qualitative judgment about that, that you invite me to,  
6           with a question which had 16 sentences in it.

7           I'm not prepared to do that, because the focus of  
8           what I was doing was entirely different than that, and  
9           I haven't spent any of my time as the Secretary of State  
10          for Defence analysing why I was in that situation in  
11          order to make this judgment.

12   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But I'm drawing your attention to  
13          a particular problem that you then had to deal with,  
14          which was the Snatch Land Rover problem that has  
15          a direct link with the helicopter issue.

16   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, my first point in response to  
17          that is that helicopters are important, and I spent so  
18          much time and energy, and our department did, through  
19          the process of UORs and otherwise, to get additional  
20          helicopters as an indication of how much we thought that  
21          was important, and I'm pleased to see that what we did  
22          is supported by this analysis in a very balanced way.  
23          It is not completely complimentary, there are some  
24          criticisms in there and they are justified, and we are  
25          now seeing the benefit of that, because you can't just

1 go and get these helicopters easily.

2 As far as vehicles are concerned, I don't  
3 necessarily accept that the use of Snatch Land Rovers  
4 was a consequence of an absence of helicopters. In  
5 fact, I don't ever remember being advised by the  
6 military that the Snatch Land Rover had no use in the  
7 operational environment either in Iraq or Afghanistan.

8 In fact, if anything, I would say that the pressure,  
9 from the point of view to examine and continually  
10 re-examine the use of Snatch Land Rovers, came from the  
11 kind of political environment to the military rather  
12 than the other way around, and I would also say to you  
13 that, no matter how many helicopters you have, if you  
14 are in an environment with insurgents, you need to get  
15 people on the ground. You need to have people out there  
16 on foot and in vehicles.

17 The way in which you present to the community that  
18 you are trying to work with is very important. So the  
19 vehicles that you use tell those communities a lot about  
20 what you are wanting to do with them, and that's  
21 important. So helicopters aside, you know, we would  
22 have had to have found a way of finding more protective  
23 vehicles, and we did, for our troops, and, you know, we  
24 have spent billions of pounds on trying to source them,  
25 to equip them and to get them into the operational

1 environment.

2 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We have to move on, but can I just  
3 ask you one more question on this?

4 We have also heard that General Houghton said to us  
5 that he would like to have given General Shirreff some  
6 attack helicopters but he couldn't because they were  
7 needed for Afghanistan. So do you accept that there was  
8 a shortage of attack helicopters as well?

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: That's the first -- I mean, when  
10 General Houghton gave that evidence, that was the first  
11 I had heard of that. I mean, we did deploy attack  
12 helicopters in support of the task force that we sent to  
13 Helmand province, because we sent them to Helmand  
14 province for a very specific reason, but they were  
15 a back-up, and as it turned out, of course, they were  
16 necessary and important.

17 The attack helicopters were used, but they weren't  
18 ours, they were from the coalition, but they were used  
19 in MND (South East) in my time as Secretary of State for  
20 Defence.

21 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So you were surprised to find out at  
22 this stage that there had been a concern --

23 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: No, I'm not surprised. I'm just  
24 telling you that nobody said to me, you know, "Can we  
25 deploy our attack helicopters to MND (South East)?"

1           When we needed attack helicopters in  
2           MND (South East), we got them from the coalition. As  
3           far as I'm aware, the American helicopters came down,  
4           but we were in a coalition, and, you know, we provided  
5           things to the coalition that were unique and Americans  
6           provided equipment and support to us.

7   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think we had better leave it  
8           there.

9   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I think it is important,  
10          Sir Lawrence. I'm conscious of the time, but you read  
11          to me a part of an accountant's evidence.

12          I have enormous respect for Nick Houghton, but it  
13          doesn't say that General Shirreff asked him for attack  
14          helicopters and he couldn't give them to him.

15          Now, if that conversation took place between them,  
16          it didn't come up to me. That's what I'm telling you.  
17          I'm not surprised, because there are lots of  
18          conversations that take place before --

19   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: All it is is an indication of the  
20          difficulty of balancing two major operations at once.

21   SIR RODERIC LYNE: Just two quick questions relating  
22          to June 2007. Gordon Brown at that time takes over as  
23          Prime Minister. Was there any change in the approach  
24          from the top towards Iraq or in the prioritisation of  
25          Iraq and Afghanistan at the Prime Minister's level?

1 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Not -- no, there wasn't.

2 SIR RODERIC LYNE: No. You remained Secretary of State for  
3 Defence, but you also, at this stage, became  
4 concurrently Secretary of State for Scotland.

5 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I did.

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Did that create a difficulty for you in  
7 attending to your very big raft of issues as  
8 Defence Secretary?

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: It didn't create a difficulty for me  
10 in the sense that I spent any less time or effort in  
11 what I was doing in the Ministry of Defence.

12 What it did was, it made me significantly dependent  
13 on my very able deputy in the Scotland office and it bit  
14 into the little time that I had for my families and some  
15 of the time that I had for my constituents, and, I mean,  
16 that's how I answered the questions at the time, and an  
17 examination of my diary, which was comprehensive, by the  
18 opposition, proved that to be the case. There wasn't  
19 a day went by that we didn't have to, in both  
20 departments, answer questions about what I was doing.

21 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But this was unprecedented for  
22 a Defence Secretary to hold another Cabinet post at the  
23 same time.

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: It was. But responsibility for quite  
25 a significant amount of the delivery of public services



1 to Scotland is devolved, and it has been since 1999.

2 I mean, I would have continued to have been involved in  
3 the Scottish politics, in any event, by the fact that  
4 I was a member of Parliament for a Scottish  
5 constituency, and still am.

6 You are right, people criticised it, and I agreed to  
7 take it on on the understanding that I would get a very  
8 able deputy who could do the bulk of the work.

9 THE CHAIRMAN: We are a lessons learned Inquiry, Mr Browne.  
10 Looking to the future and not reflecting on your own  
11 experience in the dual-hatted situation, is there  
12 something which it would be wise for future  
13 Prime Ministers to think very hard about before  
14 recreating that situation?

15 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't think it would be wise for  
16 any future Prime Minister to recreate that situation,  
17 because I think, no matter what the reality is, the  
18 public perception of it was disadvantageous, and it was  
19 particularly disadvantageous to the wellbeing of the  
20 families. Very few members of the military ever raised  
21 this issue with me, but members of the families did.

22 THE CHAIRMAN: Lawrence, back to you.

23 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Yes, just quickly on the movement to  
24 provincial Iraqi control and withdrawal from the city,  
25 how were the timetables of this managed, because there

1       was a timetable for withdrawal, but there was  
2       a particular process, which you have indicated before,  
3       already, about the steps that had to go through in order  
4       for PIC to be accepted, including the Iraqis and the  
5       Americans, ticking the boxes.

6             Did you find it difficult to manage these two  
7       timetables? Because PIC happened after we basically  
8       moved out, or moved out from the city.

9   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Yes, we didn't move out from Basra.

10  SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Not from Basra, sorry.

11  RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The nature of Basra, the relationship  
12       of the city to, you know, the wider province, the  
13       complexity of the fact that we were deployed in there,  
14       that we had, you know, we had a logistics base there, we  
15       had a, you know, the COB as well, meant that we had to,  
16       unlike Maysan or Muthanna or Dhi Qar, there was one  
17       event, we had to do it progressively. We always planned  
18       to do it progressively, but there only was one timeline  
19       and that was a conditional timeline, and, you know, we  
20       constantly assessed whether or not we were able to take  
21       the next step, and, if we were able to take the next  
22       step, then we took it.

23  SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: How was this affected by debates in  
24       London as well as debates in Iraq? Did you feel under  
25       any pressure at all to move the timetable forward?

1 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I never felt any pressure to move the  
2 timetable forward and, as I say, I mean, I actually  
3 stopped the process at one stage for a significant  
4 period of time, because we took the view that we needed  
5 4,000 troops to continue to support the Iraqi army as  
6 they were then deployed in Basra in the level of support  
7 mentoring that they needed.

8 So I never felt under any pressure and, in fact,  
9 with both Prime Ministers, I remember them questioning  
10 constantly whether or not the environment, the whole  
11 environment, including the Iraqi military capability,  
12 was able to sustain the responsibilities that we were  
13 putting on it at different stages.

14 So, if anything, you know, the interaction with  
15 others would be to question whether or not we were  
16 moving too quickly or whether we were ready to go. So  
17 I wasn't under pressure to do it.

18 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: The last three months presumably  
19 must have been a little tense, because we moved out and  
20 PIC wasn't actually until December. Was there -- do you  
21 think we would have been able to cope if the security  
22 situation had taken a severe turn for the worse in that  
23 period?

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, that's -- whether or not we  
25 would have been able to deploy our forces if there was

1 a crisis, you know, was what overwatch was all about,  
2 and, in fact, we tested that in Maysan because there was  
3 an event in Maysan, a quite serious event, after  
4 provincial Iraqi control and we deployed a battle group  
5 into a strategic position to observe what was going on,  
6 while the Iraqis, their politics and their own security,  
7 resolved it.

8 So we knew that overwatch would work, and I was  
9 reassured, as was the Prime Minister, by our military,  
10 that we had the capability to be able to deploy should  
11 anything untoward happen. As it turned out, the thing  
12 that surprised us actually was Charge of the Knights.

13 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Before we get to Charge of the Knights,  
14 in July 2007 we actually made the move from Basra City  
15 to consolidate at the airport at a time when we were  
16 being very heavily attacked in Basra City.

17 Major General Binns, who was in charge at the time,  
18 said that, when we did this, when we came out of the  
19 palace we had effectively de facto handed over control  
20 to the Iraqi security forces in Basra province but we  
21 hadn't de jure handed over Provincial Iraqi Control.

22 Did we actually hand over before we were confident  
23 that the Iraqi security forces and police could handle  
24 the situation?

25 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: We handed over in a situation where

1       we knew that the Iraqi security forces and the police  
2       could only handle the situation if we got the politics  
3       right. But the distinction between de facto and de jure  
4       is, from my perspective, just an expression of the  
5       reality. I mean, we -- until we had gone through the  
6       process of Provincial Iraqi Control, then we hadn't  
7       handed over, in a sense, the legal responsibility that  
8       we had in terms of the Security Council Resolution and  
9       the way in which we deployed our forces, but it wasn't  
10      an expression of the fitness for -- of General Mohan,  
11      you know, his troops, or General Jalil.

12     SIR RODERIC LYNE: General Binns was very complimentary  
13      about General Mohan and his agreement to take  
14      responsibility, and said he got us out of a bit of  
15      a hole. Were you being advised back up the chain of  
16      command that there was a high risk to what we were doing  
17      at that time?

18     RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The reality was that we were in  
19      a situation where we had indicated to everybody,  
20      including the militia, that we were planning to do this  
21      and, as a consequence of that, we were being attacked  
22      relentlessly.

23             The vast majority of the attacks were on us and any  
24      attempt that was made by General Dannatt or anybody else  
25      to try and explain that process was capable of the most,

1 I suppose, critical interpretation. But the reality was  
2 that removing our troops from that environment, it was  
3 expected that the attacks on that base and in that area  
4 would be reduced, and they were.

5 SIR RODERIC LYNE: We were helped, of course, by  
6 a ceasefire, but if the ceasefire had collapsed, which  
7 it didn't, at least not immediately, obviously we would  
8 have had to take a difficult decision. You would have  
9 had to take a difficult decision about whether or not to  
10 go back in.

11 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The ceasefire didn't happen until  
12 29 August. I think Moqtadr Al Sadr declared a ceasefire  
13 on 29 August. We were already removed by then, and then  
14 there was a ceasefire.

15 There are two ways of looking at that, of course.  
16 There is the way in which you suggest, but there is the  
17 other way, which is to say we wouldn't have got that  
18 ceasefire if we had still been there.

19 So we were making judgments about the ability of  
20 this process, the interaction of these political  
21 processes to start to make decisions, and they proved to  
22 be correct. Of course, I can look back retrospectively  
23 and say, if we had been wrong, then we would have been  
24 challenged and it would have been difficult, but if we  
25 weren't prepared to take some of these risks, we never

1 would have known.

2 So we were making judgments, and those judgments, in  
3 the analysis, proved to be correct, just as the process  
4 for Provincial Iraqi Control, despite the criticisms  
5 that many people had of it, despite the enormous  
6 appetite that there is in the country for people to say,  
7 "When are you going to do this? When are you going to  
8 do this? When are you going to do this?" and our  
9 resistance to it proved to be correct, but it was  
10 a difficult situation, and, of course, you are right, if  
11 things had turned out not to be as they were, then we  
12 would have been in different circumstances.

13 Did we have contingencies for that? Yes, we did.  
14 Was I advised by the military that we would be able to  
15 respond to anything that they thought would happen  
16 there? Yes, I was. Did I believe them? Yes, I did.

17 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I think it would be wrong for  
18 this session to go without some mention of the Operation  
19 Charge of the Knights. We have heard a great deal of  
20 evidence about it. A long-planned coalition and Iraq  
21 operation, Prime Minister Maliki pressed the button, to  
22 pretty well everybody's surprise, earlier and it worked.  
23 That said, there are one or two things probably worth  
24 bringing out. Martin?

25 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: First of all, I think on the question

1 of Charge of the Knights, one point that has been raised  
2 by several witnesses is that we were not given any  
3 notice by Prime Minister Maliki of this. Was this the  
4 case, as far as you were concerned, and how did this  
5 affect our position?

6 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I mean, you have to understand,  
7 I lived in an environment sometimes, because of the  
8 nature of our modern media, where things happened in the  
9 operational environment and I saw them on the screen in  
10 24-hour news before the processes could get a report to  
11 me. So it wasn't unusual for things to happen in the  
12 operational environment.

13 I do remember the effect that a Lynx helicopter  
14 being shot down had on me, standing in my front room in  
15 Edinburgh, on the day after I got the job, as it played  
16 out on 24 hour news. So -- I was well used to an  
17 environment in which things would happen, reporting up  
18 through PJHQ, through the chiefs to through my private  
19 office to me, but Operation Charge of the Knights was  
20 a surprise to me, because, I mean, I was expecting that  
21 General Mohan, whom I understood had the support of  
22 Prime Minister Maliki and continued to get the support  
23 of him after Operation Charge of the Knights, had his  
24 plan, well developed. He was very well thought of both  
25 by the coalition, in particular by our people, and this



1 operation, or an operation of this nature, would not  
2 happen basically until about the autumn of the year. So  
3 that it happened on 25 March in the spring of the year  
4 was a surprise to me, yes.

5 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Security in Basra was not really our  
6 responsibility at that time?

7 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I mean, we had a shared  
8 responsibility for it. But we didn't have the primary  
9 responsibility for it, no.

10 But, as I have said before, and I repeat, and  
11 I think it is important, but I suspect you have got the  
12 point that I'm trying to make, this was a sovereign  
13 government. What we were trying to do was get  
14 a democratically elected government in Iraq. We had one  
15 and they were making decisions about their own people.

16 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: When did it become clear that UK forces  
17 would have to intervene and, again, how was this  
18 communicated.

19 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I think it became immediately  
20 clear that this operation would require, I mean, air and  
21 artillery and intelligence and medical and logistical  
22 support, and that he was deploying troops which we were  
23 mentoring into the city, I think logically meant that we  
24 had to find a way of supporting them.

25 So it became immediately clear. It may well have

1       been a delay of some hours, maybe up to 48, before we  
2       were able to provide some of the support that he needed,  
3       but it became immediately clear that he needed support.

4   SIR MARTIN GILBERT: We anticipated that the forces we were  
5       mentoring would not be able to perform as they might  
6       have done?

7   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The whole plan about mentoring, the  
8       whole process of mentoring is that you will be with  
9       those troops as they deploy and that you -- you know,  
10      that they will learn on operational environment to the  
11      extent that they are ready to be deployed into the  
12      operational environment.

13         So the whole principle behind mentoring, I mean, the  
14      Americans took this to a significant degree in Baghdad  
15      where they co-located with Iraqi forces all over the  
16      city of Baghdad through a long period of time and as  
17      a consequence of the surge. But the idea was that we  
18      would be with them and we were used to mentoring the  
19      troops, but at a higher level.

20   SIR MARTIN GILBERT: So in a sense, the fact that they went  
21      on their own initiative was something which we could  
22      anticipate would not necessarily go well?

23   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I mean, I think in truth we had  
24      not finished training the division that he deployed into  
25      Basra. I'm not a military man and -- but I mean, even

1 I could work out that, if they hadn't finished their  
2 training, then we might need to continue to support them  
3 when they were deployed, and I'm sure that's exactly the  
4 process, probably in a much more sophisticated fashion,  
5 that the militia went through.

6 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: You have spoken with some emphasis  
7 earlier about the coalition nature of these operations  
8 and I wonder if you could, in that context, comment on  
9 the involvement of the United States in this rescue  
10 operation of Charge of the Knights and how that impacted  
11 on our own responsibilities in MND (South East)?

12 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, as well as deploying these  
13 local resources into Basra, the Prime Minister,  
14 Prime Minister Maliki, that is, came down to Basra and  
15 stayed there for a period of time and he brought with  
16 him from Baghdad a command structure for this operation.

17 The Americans were completely integrated with that  
18 command structure and came with it, bringing resources  
19 that they had, and clearly there was then, in  
20 a comparatively short period of time, quite  
21 a significant number of very high level American  
22 commanders, but these people were known to our military,  
23 who had a good relationship with them. So we managed,  
24 over a comparatively short period of time, to get  
25 a change of command for this operation that involved the

1 Americans at a very high level and integrated our people  
2 both on the ground and in the command structure.

3 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: What did you envisage would be the role  
4 of the Americans in MND (South East) once we had  
5 effectively withdrawn?

6 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I mean, part of the process of  
7 withdrawal was a constant discussion with the Americans  
8 about how they would then deploy their forces in that  
9 changing environment.

10 I mean, apart from anything else, there is only one  
11 port in Iraq, and if the Americans, as they planned to  
12 do, are going to remove their troops and a quite  
13 significant amount of equipment, then they are going to  
14 need that port facility, so taking charge of the  
15 responsibility for the lines of communication to it and  
16 as we came out, was important for them.

17 So, I fully anticipated that the Americans would  
18 take over effectively the COB, but that we would have  
19 a continuing presence in a certain number of niche areas  
20 in a military sense. One example -- of course, there is  
21 the -- nobody really discussed this very much when I was  
22 the Secretary of State for Defence when it was going on,  
23 we, in Um Qasr, were training the Iraqi Navy. It is  
24 a small navy but it is very important, and we intend and  
25 indeed have since continued to do that and make that

1 contribution. The Iraqis have an enormous appetite for  
2 our military training and we had committed ourselves  
3 through NATO and in other ways to certain commitments in  
4 terms of training, and we want to keep that up.

5 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Finally, to those who say we should  
6 have stayed to finish the job, would you argue that we  
7 did finish the job and in what way had we done so?

8 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: That phrase "stay to finish the job"  
9 a bit like the use of the word "winning", although this  
10 is not meant to be a criticism of anybody that might use  
11 it, suggests that this is, you know, a process in which  
12 there was a clear beginning, a middle and an end.

13 In fact, this is a process, and it was entirely  
14 right that we should transition to the Iraqis when they  
15 were in a position take over, but it was never going to  
16 be clear-cut. You know, we were never going to be able  
17 to graduate the Iraqi politic, graduate the Iraqi  
18 military and say, "Now you've got it", and this will be  
19 clean. There was always going to be a period of time  
20 where we were going to have to spend some time with them  
21 and that's how it has turned out.

22 So -- I mean, do I think we have achieved progress  
23 in terms of that? Yes, I do. Do I think that's good  
24 for the Iraqis and good for the people of Basra? Well,  
25 it has proved to be. The level of violence has gone

1 down dramatically. It would appear that the Iraqis are  
2 building -- and we are about to face the next general  
3 election in Iraq, the second in most people who live in  
4 Iraq's memory in their lifetime. So things are  
5 progressing in the right way from a very difficult set  
6 of circumstances.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Time is running badly against us. We haven't  
8 really touched much on those few months between spring  
9 2008 and when you left the Defence Department.

10 I wondered, in what time we have got left, if you  
11 could share with us, really, key lessons learned.  
12 I have got a couple that would be good to hear about in  
13 my own mind.

14 The first is the sustainability of this country to  
15 run two sustained, though medium-scale, operations at  
16 the same time and the tensions and strains that that  
17 creates. Can we go on doing that? One is looking to  
18 the future, a defence review maybe some time ahead.

19 The other is the inevitability in this world, where  
20 we are acting in a coalition, the dominant partner will  
21 be the United States, dominant by far over any other  
22 player in the coalition universe. Are there lessons to  
23 extract from those two things?

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Very big questions. Our ability to  
25 be able to conduct simultaneously two medium level

1 operations, if you say that, you know, they are  
2 full-scale, all-out war is, at the highest level, in  
3 a sustained fashion, inevitably will be a function of  
4 the resources that we have and there is no question that  
5 the lesson of Iraq, albeit that we were in this  
6 transition phase and that we were running down in terms  
7 of our commitment to it, and Afghanistan, which candidly  
8 was not planned to move along the timeline that it  
9 has -- we deployed in Helmand province, as I recollect  
10 it, to do a very distinctly different thing than -- than  
11 very quickly we turned out to have to do, because, as  
12 all senior military officers tell me, the enemy gets  
13 a vote and they can change, and the strategic  
14 circumstances in Afghanistan changed quite dramatically  
15 very, very quickly.

16 So the lesson is that, at the moment, we do not have  
17 sufficient resources to be able to sustain that over the  
18 long-term. Now, it turns out we haven't had to, we  
19 didn't plan to and we achieved in broad terms that plan,  
20 if, in the details of it, people can say, "You didn't do  
21 this, and you didn't do that or that wasn't perfect".

22 So -- I mean, we are -- you know, in the foothills of  
23 a strategic defence review. I doubt very much if the  
24 strategic defence review is going to tell anybody very  
25 much that they don't already know about the strategic

1 environment that we live in, about the nature of the  
2 security threat, about the challenges that we will face,  
3 about, you know, our responsibilities in the role in the  
4 world that we cast ourselves in and that others cast us  
5 in.

6 The question is whether or not this country -- and  
7 it will come down to this, you know -- has the resources  
8 or the political will or the collective will to commit  
9 those resources to create the capabilities that we will  
10 need. I mean, I'm not going to be, in any view, a part  
11 of the decision-making process for that. So other  
12 people have to take responsibility for that.

13 THE CHAIRMAN: There is a connection to the coalition  
14 context and the American partner, because of its great  
15 scale and our much lesser scale, and the degree to which  
16 we can exert sufficient proportional influence over high  
17 strategy in a coalition setting. Are there lessons for  
18 that from the Iraq experience?

19 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: My sense was that both in Iraq and  
20 Afghanistan the American military machine and its  
21 political machine respected enormously what the Brits  
22 did at a military level and at a political level.

23 Now, there are all sorts of arguments as to whether  
24 we were ahead of them in our understanding of  
25 counter-insurgency. I hear all of this very clever



1 stuff that people say, but the fact of the matter is,  
2 and I have said this already, I spent a lot of my time  
3 being told by people who were experts that the Americans  
4 wouldn't wear what we were planning to do here, there  
5 and everywhere, and I heard it in Afghanistan as well.

6 It wasn't my experience in dealing with the  
7 Americans and I did not get the sense that the Americans  
8 were not prepared to listen to us, and, interestingly,  
9 if you look at the structures of command of the  
10 coalition military, the Americans are always very  
11 comfortable about having our senior people very close to  
12 them, and sometimes, even after they retire from our  
13 military, they bring them very close to them.

14 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Mr Browne. Is there any  
15 last thing you would like to share with us or shall we  
16 close now?

17 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I had anticipated that we might have  
18 had a discussion about the complementary parts of what  
19 is called the comprehensive approach.

20 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes.

21 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I do have some views. Maybe I should  
22 write to you about them?

23 THE CHAIRMAN: If you would, that would be much appreciated.  
24 We have heard evidence about it from a number of  
25 quarters, but not, of course, from yourself. That would

1           be helpful.

2   RT HON DES BROWNE MP: As Sir Lawrence pointed out,

3           I accepted quite an onerous responsibility in terms of  
4           co-ordination at the beginning of my term of office for  
5           Iraq, and I learned quite a lot. I may not have learned  
6           it correctly, but I am prepared to share with you.

7   THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much again. We will close now  
8           for ten minutes, and then resume, after ten minutes,  
9           when our next witness will be John Hutton, who was your successor  
10          as Defence Secretary, Mr Browne. Thank you.

11   (3.58 pm)

12                               (Short break)

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