Iraq Inquiry Witness Statement

John Buck, FCO Director for Iraq, September 2003-July 2004

My roles and responsibilities in relation to Iraq

I was Head of Public Diplomacy in 2003, as the Iraq conflict was approaching. In February 2003 the Permanent Undersecretary asked me to take over the Government Communication and Information Centre (CIC), a Unit staffed largely by members of the Government Information Service seconded from different Whitehall Ministries, and which had recently produced the second Iraq dossier. The CIC was situated in the FCO but worked closely with Alastair Campbell at No 10. During the conflict the CIC coordinated ministerial engagement with the media. On the eve of the conflict, by which time the Unit had doubled in size to 20 or so staff, we absorbed seconded staff from one or two other coalition governments, notably the USA, to try to ensure broader coordination of media engagement.

I wound down the CIC during May. Four or five UK staff deployed to Baghdad and Basra to help with the Coalition's media efforts. Alastair Campbell, having consulted Ambassador Bremer, asked me towards the end of May to go to Iraq for a short period to help establish a coherent CPA media operation. Working closely with a military colleague, that task involved drawing together key elements of US and British civilian and military media operations into a joint team; linking it, via my attendance at Ambassador Bremer's morning meetings, with the major ongoing developments that required media handling; and drawing up an outline media strategy.

I returned to the UK in July. In mid-September John Sawers asked me to become Director of the new Iraq Directorate (an evolution of the Iraq Policy Unit that had been operating over the summer) pending my posting the following September as Ambassador to Lisbon. I was Iraq Director until July 2004, a period that in the event coincided with the existence of the CPA.

We quickly developed a structure for the Iraq Directorate of three Units:

- The Iraq Policy Unit focused on the political process in Iraq; the plethora of related issues, including the economy and human rights; international aspects, including UN issues and coordination with allies; and domestic political demands, including parliamentary debates and ministerial correspondence.

- The Iraq Operations Unit was responsible for all civilian (except MOD) deployments to Iraq, both UK civil servants and contractors. The Unit coordinated requirements, conducted some recruitment, organised pre-posting (particularly security) training and briefing, and liaison with families.

- The Iraq Security Sector Reform Unit, which included seconded staff from the MOD. Policing was a major focus for this Unit, which also worked closely with the MOD on the broader policy aspects of security sector reform.

A Counsellor (one star) Diplomatic Service Officer headed each of these Units. The Head of the Iraq Policy Unit was already in place when I arrived. Heads of the other Units were put in place over the month following my arrival. The Head of the Security Sector reform Unit had a security policy background.

My role was to lead and manage these three Units in pursuit of British objectives in Iraq, ensuring high quality policy advice across the range of Iraq issues, effective FCO input into broader Whitehall strategy, resourcing and servicing of our operations in Iraq, and effective diplomatic coordination with allies.

Context

It may be worth setting out one or two aspects of the broader context.

There had not been at this stage – September 2003 - and arguably never was the Whitehall resource focus that might have been expected. The FCO in particular, together with other key Whitehall departments, had deployed significant numbers of people to Iraq; and the Treasury had created a reserve of £60million for civilian operations. But my recollection is that, so far as the FCO was concerned, we were in practice only able to draw on that reserve for the security costs of staff deployments. As an example, I remember spending a significant amount of time, soon after becoming Director, trying to find several hundred thousand pounds to finance the purchase of a transmitter in southern Iraq for the Iraq Media Network, something I think we had undertaken to the CPA and US to do. I tried the FCO finance people and was told that purchase of a transmitter wasn't really a proper call on FCO funds and that this should come from the Treasury's reserve. I went to the Treasury and was told that this should really come out of the FCO's existing allocation, but perhaps it was worth trying DFID. I had a meeting with DFID, who took the view that they didn't really do media. I then went back to the FCO who did then find the money.

So far as policing was concerned, money was allocated in late September from the Global Conflict Prevention Pool (funds jointly controlled by the FCO, MOD and DFID); and we also succeeded in due course in drawing on the GCPP for some media development in Iraq (primarily specialist consultancy on the establishment of the regulatory framework for a democratic media; and two mobile transmitters). The GCPP also I think financed, in 2004, specialist out-of-country training for criminal justice professionals. But I doubt if the total non-DFID programme expenditure in Iraq (direct personnel and security costs aside) exceeded £10million during my time as Director. Meanwhile the US eventually allocated, if my recollection is correct, some $1million for policing alone.

I do not want to suggest that finance for policing was in the end a major inhibiting factor. By 2004 our contribution in this area was, in terms of personnel, if anything disproportionate, when compared to our presence in other areas of activity. But I think the lack of a readily accessible source of funds

in the early stages of the occupation arguably contributed to systemic problems of responsiveness; it may have been indicative of a Whitehall mindset that still saw Iraq as a temporary crisis; and it made us in practice very dependent on US funding for major programme activities.

More generally my time as Director, in my memory, is divided into distinct phases. The autumn of 2003 was a very difficult time, with a sense of being behind the game, in terms of deployment of specialists – including policemen - to southern Iraq in particular. By early 2004 things seemed improved, despite continuing security difficulties. We had the essentials of a route map towards the early restoration of Iraqi sovereignty. Most specialists recruited by DFID had arrived in Iraq and when Patrick Nixon took over in February he felt existing deployments were sufficient. We had significant numbers of police in place. We were developing a detailed plan for the transition to Embassy/Consulate General. We were achieving some leverage, we thought, on human rights issues. There had been significant achievements in management of the economy. We then, in spring 2004, had the Moqhtadr al Sadr uprising in the south (with temporary loss of control in Al Kut and Nasaryah); the events in Fallujah; and the revelations about Abu Ghreib. That was probably the most depressing time of all. It was then a case of collectively gritting our teeth and pressing on to transition.

FCO and HMG roles and responsibilities in relation to policing

I inherited a position where the FCO led on policing aspects of security sector reform in Iraq. This no doubt reflected the FCO's policy lead on Iraq more generally; expertise within the Foreign Office (in United Nations Department's International Policing Unit) of ongoing British police deployments in Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone and East Timor; and the way in which the cross-Government Iraq Planning Unit had evolved into the FCO's Iraq Policy Unit and then Iraq Directorate.

The Head of the Iraq Directorate's Security Sector Reform Unit led a project team that included colleagues from the FCO's United Nations Department (UND). Staffing of UND's International Policing Unit included a secondee from the Police Resources Unit in the Home Office; a secondee from the MOD police; and a retired police chief superintendent with experience of overseas police deployment (who subsequently became deputy director of the police training school established in Jordan). These officials had links with ACPO and some individual police services, and the Head of Iraq SSR Unit developed a close and regular working relationship with Chief Constable Paul Kernaghan of ACPO. She also visited Belfast for discussions with the Northern Ireland Minister responsible for policing and with the PSNI. I worked with Paul Kernaghan on the force generation conference we hosted in late October 2003 (see below). The Unit kept in regular touch with police on the ground in Iraq, in Baghdad and Basra.

My recollection is that the main link with the Home Office was via UND's secondee from the Police Resourcing Unit. The Home Office also attended meetings of the Ad Hoc Ministerial Committee on Iraq (with the Home Office

Minister speaking on policing issues) and from time to time, I think, the meetings of senior officials in No10 or the Cabinet Office.

Policing Strategy

The short-term objective of UK policy was the establishment of an effective interim police force that would help stabilise the security situation in Iraq. In the longer term it was the establishment of a viable and sustainable police force, respecting human rights, democracy and Iraq's diversity, within a fully functioning security sector.

Over the summer the CPA had developed a good understanding of policing in Iraq under Saddam, helped by the police force having remained a reasonably intact institution. The force had been militarised under Saddam and incorporated into the security apparatus, but very much at the bottom of the hierarchy, with little training or conventional police skills, a fear of initiative and a tradition of supplementing poor pay with the acceptance of small-scale bribes. It was organised on a governorate basis, with the governorate police directorates reporting to the General Director of Police in Baghdad.

The overall strategy for the development and reform of policing in Iraq was the responsibility of the CPA. We sought to influence that strategy on the ground through the work of Deputy Chief Constable Brand, chief Police Adviser in at the CPA in Baghdad, who had deployed during the summer. Policing also featured from time to time in the Prime Minister's conversations with President Bush and in Sir Nigel Sheinwald's with the US National Security Adviser, sometimes focused on resourcing issues (there was a question at one stage of Congressional funding being delayed), sometimes in the context of wider SSR issues, but rarely in detail. We instructed our Embassy in Washington to lobby from time to time; and the Directorate's SSR Unit had regular teleconferences with their State Department opposite numbers.

In practice, the CPA had considerable freedom of action, at least during 2003, in this as in other areas; and given the complexities of the situation, the strategy could only realistically be developed on the ground. The first CPA police strategy emerged towards the end of 2003.

The main focus during the autumn of 2003 was training, given the low skills base of existing police and the number being recruited to bring numbers up to some 70,000. The Jordanians had offered to provide land for a training facility in or near Amman, an offer quickly accepted by the CPA (not without some grumbling from some members of the Iraq Governing Council, who were suspicious of the influence of their neighbours, feared the impact on perceptions of the security situation in Iraq and would have preferred the money to be spent in their country). US contractors undertook to build a facility in two months. There were plans also for police academies in Baghdad, Basra and Mosul.

The UK's contribution was planned to be up to 75 trainers for the Amman project, where training was to begin on 25 November; and 20 or so trainers for

the police school at Az Zubayr, near Basra, from December. Training in Basra in fact began, I think, towards the end of October with a "train the trainers" project run by a contingent of Danish police. The Danes commuted daily from Basra to Az Zubayr, some 20 kilometres away, trading a degree of security (improvised explosive devices – IEDs - were a growing threat) for better amenities in Basra. But ACPO were insistent, as I recall, that British police trainers should stay at Az Zubayr, which entailed the development of accommodation there.

CPA plans at this stage (autumn 2003) envisaged mentoring and continuation training by 1500 international police in Iraq. The State Department (and we) thought this was unrealistic, given the security situation. The State Department had 1200 ex-police officers available through DynCorp, a private contractor, but were unwilling to deploy them until security improved. In the event, the security situation in much of Iraq remained problematic into 2004 and mentoring remained a gap. But there was some progress in the south with the deployment in early 2004 of PSNI officers as monitors and mentors in both Basra and, travelling from Basra each day, the other southern governorates. I think military/MOD police were also involved in mentoring and monitoring.

Military influence over the implementation of policing strategy grew as time went on. A Fragmentary Order (FRAGO) for military units to assume a greater role in an accelerated police training programme was issued unexpectedly, without CPA warning, at the end of October 2003. This caused some consternation in Basra, not least because of the implications for the Danish police trainers whose "train the trainers" programme was called into question. In the event Hillary Synnott and his colleagues developed an action plan adapted to the situation and facilities in the south, with an accelerated building programme at the Az Zubayr Police Academy, together with enhanced and extended engagement by the Royal Military Police. We agreed with Basra that this did not negate the continuing need for civil police involvement to enhance the civilian nature of policing, and police trainers were deployed to Basra as planned in early December, with the first course completed around the turn of the year. The Danes refocused their activity to help the British police and RMPs set up new systems.

In a sense the FRAGO of October was a forerunner of the US/CPA's transfer of responsibility for policing reform from the civilian to military structures in spring 2004. In parallel there was a running debate, though not a very prominent one, about whether the Iraq Civil Defence Corps, stood up and trained by the military, should evolve into a carabinieri-style police force or an army reserve more akin to the US National Guard. But my recollection is that this was regarded as an issue for the future and was not resolved during my time. I understand that the ICDC was eventually absorbed into the Iraqi Army.

Another aspect of this complex picture was the role of the various militias, and differing Iraqi attitudes towards them. Members of the Iraqi Governing Council visiting London in October argued that police training needed to be accelerated, lest militias begin filling the gap. Two months later different members of the IGC, also on a visit to London, were arguing that there should be more cooperation with and use of militias (and that the IGC should have a role in the selection of

recruits). These differences reflected internal Iraqi politics. In reality, practice on the ground varied, though it seems clear in retrospect that in one or two areas militias were recruited into the police, either through a process of infiltration or as a matter of policy by local commanders.

The police programme was the UK 's main effort in non-military security sector reform. We also seconded a Home Office official to the Ministry of the Interior, I think in autumn 2003, but my recollection is that he left after a short period. There was in addition an excellent British expert recruited direct by the CPA (who subsequently co-wrote a report, under the auspices of the Rand Corporation, which suggested that reform of the MOI had lagged behind work on policing).

We were also active in wider criminal justice issues, including on the human rights side, with Ann Clwyd's work on detention policy and Audrey Glover's as Head of the CPA's Human Rights Team from early 2004; and with the provision of forensic, investigative and legal support. We were constrained in the extent of direct support for the development of Iraq's court system by concerns about the potential imposition of the death penalty by the Iraq Tribunal and the potential conflict with our obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.

I am not sure in retrospect to what extent these activities were rooted in a fully articulated, comprehensive and integrated CPA strategy across the whole security sector and criminal justice area. Rather they were responses to perceived needs as the situation developed and knowledge grew. But we were always aware that effective policing depended on the establishment of a functioning court system and that the two needed to develop in parallel.

Operating Framework

As explained, the effort at the London end was led by a small team in the Iraq Directorate, drawing on expertise elsewhere in the FCO, Home Office, MOD and, in particular, ACPO. The Head of the Security Sector Reform Unit in the Iraq Directorate led coordination of this group.

We were dependent on the UK's individual police forces for the provision of volunteer civilian police to serve as police advisers or trainers in Iraq. During the autumn of 2003 the focus of London activity was the creation of a pool of 200 police officer volunteers with the right expertise, which could be drawn on to fill training and monitoring roles. There was considerable political pressure to get the envisaged initial cohort on the ground as soon as possible but advertisement across police forces, selection, training, preparation, plus the development of the necessary infrastructure in Jordan and Basra, meant that they were not deployed until late November/early December.

Military and MOD police as well as Territorial Army personnel with a police background were also deployed into police positions, initially as a temporary measure pending the arrival of civilian police, more generally as it became clear that requirements were outstripping our (or partners') ability to provide civilian police in sufficient numbers. Over time we also drew on some contracted staff –

ex-police officers working for a private security company (the US had used DynCorp contractors from the beginning for the Jordan training project).

Deployments were financed initially by the FCO, then by the Global Conflict Prevention Fund (programme money controlled jointly by the FCO, MOD and DIFD), which in late September agreed an allocation of £4-5million. Security costs were met from the Treasury's Strategic Reserve, the total value of which – for all Iraq purposes – was £60million during the financial year 2003-2004. The bulk of programme costs on the ground were met by the US through CPA funds. My recollection is that a Congressional supplemental budget of some $1billion was eventually agreed for policing.

We made considerable effort during the autumn of 2003 to generate policing contributions from other countries, both within and beyond the coalition. We agreed with the US that the UK would focus on EU partners, accession countries, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa. I chaired a conference attended by these countries, as well as the relevant Assistant Deputy Secretary in the US State Department, in London in late October, with Paul Kernaghan of ACPO playing a key role. Our assumption was that most countries, particularly non-Coalition members, would find it easier to supply trainers for the Jordan project, which was the key focus of the conference. The conference was scheduled in advance of the Madrid Donors Conference so that those unwilling to make immediate commitments might do so in or following Madrid. Canada, Poland and the Czech Republic pledged contributions in London. Austria and, I think, one or two other countries did so at or after Madrid, following further lobbying in capitals. Separately, the Danes were already involved in training in Basra and there had been a contingent of Italian carabinieri from the early stages of the post-conflict period, as well as a contingent of Portuguese GNR (National Republican Guard, similar in concept to the Italian carabinieri).

One difficulty was that a number of countries expressed an interest in helping, but wished to do so outside the plans and structure agreed by the CPA. This was particularly true of the French and Germans, who saw civilian policing as a relatively uncontroversial way of engaging with reconstruction efforts, but had difficulties of politics and principle with any suggestion that their personnel would be under CPA authority. The French offered to train Iraqi police in Paris – a proposal that was never taken up. More seriously, the Germans offered to provide trainers for a project in Abu Dhabi, with possible Egyptian participation. This had grown out of visits by Chancellor Schröder to both countries and thereafter became a politically driven priority for the Germans.

We were concerned about further diffusion of effort and during a visit to Berlin in December 2003 for discussions with the Chancellery, Foreign and Interior ministries, I sought to persuade the Germans to switch focus to the CPA police training project in Jordan, on the basis that trainers would be there under separate bilateral MOUs. But the political impetus in Berlin was fixed and the Abu Dhabi project began in March 2003 with a first course for Iraqi scenes of crime officers and laboratory technicians (in the event it made a very useful contribution). Around the same time, the Iraqi Minister of the Interior was requesting Qatari funding for possible training of Iraqi police in Egypt. So

maintaining coordination and focus, between partners and with the Iraqis, was a continuing challenge. From late autumn 2003 we instituted regular meetings of MND (SE) partners, plus the US, in London, co-chaired by me and my opposite number in the MOD, with security sector reform on the agenda.

We looked for ways of involving international organisations during the autumn, but without much success. An initial approach to the OSCE in August 2003 had met the response that the organisation had never done anything on the scale required in Iraq; there would be resistance from some members to devoting resources to such a huge out-of-area programme; and the French, Germans, Russians and others would be sensitive about CPA authority. The OSCE suggested the possibility of the Kosovo police school training some Iraqis, but it was never pursued (although the American head of the Kosovo training school did deploy to Iraq or Jordan). I see from the papers that we had some further contact with the OSCE in spring 2004 in an attempt to find someone who might help create an Iraqi police inspectorate.

The EU Council Secretariat attended the conference in London in late October but did not, so far as I can recall, play an active part. The UN had been traumatised by the bombing of the Baghdad headquarters in August and was effectively out of the picture. In reality, it was only as the restoration of Iraqi sovereignty approached in June 2004 that there was a plausible opportunity to involve international organisations, and I visited Brussels in May 2004 to urge a step-change in EU involvement.

Lessons for the Future

The circumstances in Iraq during my period as Director were extraordinarily complex and difficult. Our ability to provide an effective input into security sector reform, and particularly policing, were hampered by many of the same factors that conditioned our effectiveness in other areas – the paucity of the coalition's civilian operational planning, the degradation of institutional structures under Saddam, the confusion of the immediate post-conflict period, the mixed success of our efforts to engage and influence the CPA, the CPA's de-Baathification order and the (connected) deteriorating security situation in much of the country. The result was that we were always seeking to make up for lost time and opportunities.

Against that background, the people working on security sector reform in my Directorate, with other colleagues, put in huge effort to respond to the needs on the ground. By early 2004 there were 55 police trainers in Jordan (which had risen to over 70 two months later) – the largest national contingent; 24 police trainers at Az Zubayr; police mentors in Basra and the southern governorates; and we had helped generate significant contributions from other nations.

That said, it is clear that our ability to deploy the necessary resources lagged behind requirements. There are important lessons (some of which may already have been learnt) for any similar future interventions:

- Pre-conflict planning and coordination with partners will always be a crucial determinant of success in the security sector reform area, as in others. In the case of Iraq, detailed police requirements and strategy would have been difficult to develop in advance, given our poor pre-conflict knowledge of the situation and structures on the ground and the inter-agency difficulties in Washington. But in retrospect some elements of the work we were struggling with in autumn 2003 – particularly the identification of sources within the UK police for meeting some of the likely generic requirements such as senior mentors and trainers - might have been put in train in the period leading up to the conflict, notwithstanding the obvious difficulties at the time.

- Policy responsibility and resources should go together. In the post-war period the FCO had overall Whitehall lead for reform of policing in Iraq but was dependent for the UK's contribution to implementation on the ability and willingness of 50-plus police forces to provide officers willing to serve in Iraq. The operational independence of the police is clearly a key aspect of the British system, and needs to be protected. But some way should be found to create a rapid reaction capability for international police support– perhaps a pool of police officers with the right skills, willing in principle to serve at short notice in post-conflict zones as advisers or trainers, who might be quickly "commandeered" for deployment overseas. Some of those in the pool might be officers who have recently retired, but with relevant experience, which would ease the potential operational implications for individual police forces.

- More generally, responsibilities within Whitehall might in retrospect have been more clearly defined, particularly between the FCO and Home Office, and there is a broader question as to whether post-conflict policing reform should have been an FCO lead. We were fortunate in having seconded colleagues, but the creation of the cross-Government Stabilisation Unit might provide a better means of pooling government skills (though in my view to be fully effective it should be situated in the Cabinet Office with full central authority).

- While guarding against a militarised effort, there should be a planning assumption that MOD/military police will be needed for security sector reform duties in the early post-conflict phase when security considerations may make it difficult for civilian police drawn from domestic UK forces to deploy.

- In retrospect I think there was on the US side within the CPA, in Washington and to some extent in London, too great a reliance on numbers recruited and trained as the criteria of success. This was at least in part driven by the political requirement to show the impact of coalition efforts.

There are some wider lessons that go beyond the question of policing:

- In the FCO we were reliant for too long on conventional personnel systems for staffing the Iraq Directorate. It was often easier to find people willing to

serve in Baghdad, Basra and the governorates, which was seen as exciting and rewarding, than for work in the Directorate, which was seen as a relentless high-pressure grind with no specific compensation. As a result, we had a series of temporary fixes with officers coming from the "corporate pool" for a few months pending substantive postings; some requirements met slowly if at all; and a number of gaps. Many staff who came into the Directorate on this basis responded brilliantly, but the strains of under-resourcing were demonstrated in the spring of 2004 when I had a note from the Head of the FCO's Health and Welfare team expressing concern about the number of colleagues from the Directorate reporting with symptoms of stress-related illness. It was only at that point that we collectively acknowledged the problem of under-resourcing and mechanisms – including preference in subsequent postings - were designed to ensure so far as possible that we had sufficient people with the right skills.

- I am not sure that the strategic reserve controlled by the Treasury worked as well as it might have. As I have said, my recollection is that, so far as FCO costs were concerned, we only succeeded in bids for expenditure on the security of staff. More accessible funding, perhaps controlled by the Ad Hoc Ministerial Committee, might have helped the UK respond more flexibly and speedily in some areas.

The overriding question, of course, is whether the British Government organised its ministerial, departmental and financial resources to match the challenges of Iraq. I think the answer to that question is almost certainly no; and I suspect that the creation of the Stabilisation Unit, while an improvement, will not provide a solution to match the scale of the challenges we and our partners faced. The fact is that the British Government is not – cannot – be set up to occupy other countries. Even had all the above elements been in place in 2003, we would no doubt still have encountered many of the difficulties we experienced. We were seeking to construct structures, systems and capacity in a country with complex political, religious, ethnic and tribal traditions and allegiances of which we had limited knowledge. Moral and political considerations aside, any government should think very carefully in future about the wisdom of embarking on a similar enterprise, given the enormous practical challenges.

John Buck

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