

1 (2.00 pm)

2 RT HON HILARY BENN MP

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Good afternoon.

4 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Good afternoon.

5 THE CHAIRMAN: Welcome ladies and gentlemen and our witness,

6 Mr Hilary Benn. We will be hearing from our witness.

7 You were Secretary of State for International

8 Development from October 2003 until June 2007 but before

9 that you were, I believe, Minister of State in DFID

10 from May 2003.

11 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: That's correct.

12 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes. This morning we heard from Clare Short

13 who was Secretary of State for International Development

14 from 1997 until her resignation over Iraq in May 2003,

15 and today's session will talk about that testimony we

16 heard from Ms Short and allow us to hear more about the

17 CPA period up to the end of June 2004, and then we will

18 continue the story up to June 2007 when you left the

19 department and went to a different place.

20 Now, I say two things to every witness: we recognise

21 that witnesses are giving evidence based in part on

22 their recollection of events, and we, of course,

23 cross-check what we hear against the papers and I remind

24 every witness that they will later be asked to sign

25 a transcript of the evidence to the effect that the

1 evidence given is truthful, fair and accurate.

2 With those preliminaries, can I turn to
3 Sir Lawrence Freedman to open the questions?
4 Sir Lawrence?

5 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We heard this morning from
6 Clare Short about her resignation. This was
7 a department that she had in a sense built up since
8 1997, had been a very prominent figure for six years,
9 big international impact, and then resigned over the
10 most controversial issue of the time. You then came in
11 as Minister of State and, later, as Secretary of State.

12 Can I get a sense of the impact on the department
13 itself of this rather tumultuous period and the problems
14 of managing it after such a high profile resignation.

15 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, the decision about military
16 action in Iraq, everyone had a view on it, right across
17 Whitehall, in politics, in wider society, but I can
18 honestly say that it did not affect at all the
19 professionalism with which the staff of DFID went about
20 their job, or the relationship that we had with other
21 bits of Whitehall. That was a particular period and
22 I think we are all aware of what went on and what
23 everybody felt, but there was a task to be done and people got on
24 with it, in truth.

1 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So you didn't feel that was sort of
2 a burden weighing down on you as you started in your
3 job?

4 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Clearly, the controversy had an
5 impact on people, but I think you had to separate that
6 out, whatever people felt, from the task in hand, which
7 was: we were in Iraq, there was a job of work to be done
8 and that's what people applied themselves to.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: What would you say were our
10 objectives at the time? We are starting from when you
11 were Minister of State, because you were playing
12 a pretty active role in Iraq from the start.

13 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, well, first of all to deal with
14 the situation that we found -- and in essence, what we
15 were trying to do was to make sure that things worked.
16 But that proved to be extremely difficult because of the
17 circumstances.

18 To have an eye all the time on the
19 long-term aim, which was to build the Iraqis' capacity
20 so that they could take their own decisions for
21 themselves, and that is the lesson of development.

22 Wherever you are thinking about in the world, you can't
23 develop people, in the end they do have to do it for
themselves.

24 To do practical things in the meantime, in
25 terms of infrastructure, particularly in the south, and
of course the south had suffered enormously during the

1 time of Saddam Hussein's rule.
And to build up the CPA,
2 to get capacity in, and that proved some task, and one
3 of the lessons clearly we have learned, which I know the
4 Committee has touched on in previous evidence, is how we
5 could better deal with that in future, and no doubt
6 we'll come to that a little later on.

7 Those were really the objectives that we had to make
8 sure that we had the resources required but that was
9 both about money, people, and then all of that had to be
10 tested against the situation on the ground, which
11 changed quite quickly and security and the ability
12 actually to do this was a big constraint throughout the
13 whole of that period. It ebbed and flowed a bit, but it
14 did make life difficult.

15 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Against that backdrop, how did you
16 view the tensions, which we have taken evidence about,
17 between the focus on a national plan for Iraq and the
18 need, therefore, for us to be involved in the whole
19 country -- we were an occupying power for all of Iraq
20 with the United States -- and the fact that we had ended
21 up with an apparent responsibility -- what has been
22 described to us as this box in the south?

23 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, you had to focus your effort
24 in the two different places and do the right thing. In
25 relation to Iraq centrally, obviously the establishment

1 of the CPA, the part that we played in that; and the
2 capacity-building that we were trying to give over time
3 to the Iraqi ministries. Because one of the things we
4 have to understand is that Iraq is a country that
5 had been brutalised and traumatised by 30 years of Saddam Hussein.
It was

6 a country in which people didn't like to take decisions
7 because the consequences of taking the wrong decision
8 were very serious indeed, and I remember at one point
9 after the transition to Iraqi responsibility talking to
10 the then Finance Minister of the time, who described
11 how, one day, he had come into work and a large file had
12 appeared on his desk and he said "What's this?" and the
13 answer was, "These are the papers you will need to
14 consider to decide on the salary of one of the security
15 guards that we are employing in the ministry".

16 Now, it seemed to me, as a tale, that told you
17 something about the culture there had been and nobody
18 can run a country or a ministry on that basis.

19 So I think the fact that from the beginning we were
20 trying in the centre to focus effort on capacity
21 building, Prime Minister's office, the Finance Ministry,
22 the Interior Ministry was the right thing to do,
23 because, in the end, it was trying to ensure that the
24 Iraqis, as they took responsibility -- and they did that
25 pretty quickly, if you think of the transfer, although

1 it may have seemed like a long period of time from the
2 invasion to the summer of 2004, actually it passed
3 pretty quickly -- to build their capacity there.

And in

4 the south, well, that's where our troops were. We had
5 to get on and deal with what we found. That's why we
6 put a particular focus on infrastructure.

7 But the problem was, of
8 course, not damage caused during the course of the
9 conflict; it was the consequence of 30 years of neglect
10 and in the Shia south malign neglect, and it was very
11 difficult -- it proved very difficult to overcome that,
12 because, if you take the electricity system, for
13 example, in the end, there were short-term things that
14 we could do, but replacing an electricity system that
15 didn't work, you know, was a ten-year job.

16 One of the other problems that we had, of course,
17 was that the international institutions, in particular
18 the World Bank and the UN, that in other circumstances
19 would be in a country in a post-conflict period, weren't
20 there for reasons of security, in particular after the
21 Canal Hotel bombing of August 2003.

22 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: That, in a sense, was my next
23 question, was the -- we have heard from Clare Short
24 about the hopes in the British Government that the
25 international institutions, the UN, but, also, in terms

1 of finance, the World Bank, would play a large role, but
2 for a variety of reasons this was not going to be the
3 case.

4 How did that affect discussions about resource
5 implications of the role that we found ourselves in?

6 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, it meant that it was -- even
7 with the establishment of IRFFI, the International
8 Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq, it meant that money
9 being spent out of that was quite slow. The UN had
10 a better record than the World Bank and the record will
11 show that we talked a great deal to the Bank. I talked
12 both to Jim Wolfensohn, and then to Paul Wolfowitz,
13 about trying to get the Bank in and working, and
14 I think the Bank has, since then, done some work to try
15 and improve its capacity to work in these particular
16 kinds of circumstances.

17 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think we will come on to the later
18 role of the World Bank, but just in terms of the
19 reassessment of British policy --

20 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Bluntly, what it meant was that
21 partners you would normally have -- and I would also add
22 to that list the NGO community -- were not there because
23 security for them deteriorated very quickly and the
24 traumatic effect on the UN system, in particular of the
25 death of Sergio Vieira de Mello and the 21 other people

1 who were killed in that bombing cannot be
2 underestimated, and then there was the attack on the
3 ICRC, I think a month later, and that meant that we were
4 having to do things that, in other circumstances, we
5 wouldn't normally have done.

6 For DFID, in particular, that meant that we had to
7 take on infrastructure projects that normally the
8 World Bank would have done in those circumstances. But
9 that was the demand that faced us, so we got on and did
10 it and tried to find some very creative ways of making
11 that happen.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Now, in September 2003, you visited
13 Iraq and this was with the CPA in place, in fact the CPA
14 began almost as you arrived in DFID.

15 First in terms of your visit, what were Iraqis
16 themselves saying to you? What sort of expectations did
17 you get from them about what they were looking forward
18 to, what they hoped for?

19 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Look, I think with the fall of
20 Saddam, there were very high hopes that things would
21 change and change quickly, and some of those
22 expectations were very, very high indeed. But effecting
23 practical change on the ground was quite difficult for
24 some of the reasons I have already alluded to: capacity,
25 the legacy of what had happened over 30 years and the

1 emerging politics.

2 Because I would describe it very simply like this:
3 this is a society that had been repressed and had had
4 the lid stuck on very firmly for a very long period of
5 time, and the lid came off. If you look at the country,
6 all of the people had grievances, the Kurds, the Shia
7 and then the Sunnis, who had been running the show,
8 thinking "What's our place in the new Iraq going to be
9 like?" a lot of violence, a deteriorating security
10 situation, and all of that had an impact on what it was
11 possible to do.

12 We were, of course, working with the governor and
13 the Provincial Council. Hilary Synnott in the south was
14 working very hard to build the capacity. I mean, I went
15 to see him and said, "What can we do to help?" and he
16 said, "Can you break through these logjams that are
17 getting in the way of making progress?" and we did our
18 best to sort them out. "Can you recruit more people?"
19 and we asked Crown agents to do that, but it took time.
20 I think he asked for 37 people, and by the
21 following January, I think 17 had arrived.

22 One of the lessons, of course, of this -- and
23 I remember writing it in the note I sent to the
24 Prime Minister after that first visit -- was, as well as
25 reporting back on my impressions, what I had discussed,

1 what I had put in place, was we do need to think about
2 how we deal with reconstruction, in these circumstances,
3 better in future. And I set some work in train, that
4 happened across Whitehall and out of it came the
5 proposal for the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit,
6 which is now the Stabilisation Unit, which is all about
7 being better able to have capacity to hand to do this
8 particular kind of work.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: This question started with the hopes
10 and expectations of Iraqis at the time. What you have
11 described is a rather prolonged and difficult process of
12 responding to that. I just want to get a sense of
13 whether you were concerned at that point that
14 expectations may be running ahead of reality in terms of
15 what was likely to be provided for.

16 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, I think that would be a very
17 fair reflection of what a lot of people thought. Because
18 it would be very difficult, given the circumstances, to
19 match all of those expectations, but that was
20 a consequence of this freedom in comparison to what
21 there had been before. But there was also great
22 insecurity that came with it, for all the circumstances
23 I think that we well understand, and it was a time of
24 enormous change.

25 I remember asking a couple of journalists, "What's

1 the most widely read newspaper in Iraq?" and they looked
2 at each other and said, "To tell you the truth, we don't
3 know". You looked at the satellite dishes that had
4 suddenly sprung up on the tops of the houses in the wake
5 of the fall of Saddam. So it was a time of profound
6 change and uncertainty, and, of course, what do most
7 people want? They want peace, quiet, stability,
8 a better life and a job.

9 It has taken time for that to progress, but the only
10 people in the end who could sort this out were the Iraqi
11 people themselves. Which is why getting political
12 institutions up and running so they could take those
13 decisions was so important as an objective of our
14 policy.

15 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Again, going back to this period and
16 the time of your visit, to what extent were you made
17 aware by the military of their concerns about the
18 relationship between an early reconstruction effort and
19 security, that there was a danger of a vicious circle of
20 growing insecurity, harder to provide services, more
21 insecurity, as opposed to the virtuous cycle where --

22 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I was very aware of that. I got off
23 the plane in Basra and went straight into a briefing
24 from Graeme Lamb on precisely the situation in the south
25 and I remember he said very clearly, "Security equals

1 consent, combined with progress on improving people's
2 lives". So very aware of that.

3 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: What were the military hoping for
4 from DFID at that time?

5 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, fast progress. Now, there are
6 different timetables and I know this is something that
7 the Committee has touched upon, because the military
8 commanders are there for six months and then they go and
9 the next commander arrives, and obviously, they want to
10 see progress very quickly during the six-month period.
11 And in some respects the use of quick impact project
12 funding is a way of enabling them to do things that they
13 can see for themselves as they are out and about and
14 doing what they do with great professionalism, but it is
15 also about understanding that there are things that you
16 need to do that in the end are going to help to deal
17 with the problem but aren't quite so visible or quite so
18 quick in producing results, and I think over time there
19 has been a greater recognition that that was the right
20 approach.

21 Now, it helps if you have an understanding of what
22 each of you is trying to do and I think that has
23 developed over time, and, again, I think we have learned
24 some of those lessons particularly in Afghanistan and
25 during the course of our time in Iraq. Because if you

1 understand what each of you is trying to do, then you
2 can work together in a better way. Of course there was
3 understandable impatience for faster progress. We all
4 shared that, all of us.

5 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So the position at the time is that
6 we are having to give a greater focus to the south.
7 That's where we are. We don't have the resources that
8 we might have hoped we would have had from the
9 World Bank. We are -- there is a sense of fragile
10 insecurity. In August, there had been the first rioting
11 in Basra. So the military are looking for quick impact
12 projects.

13 You are saying, one, that we have to concentrate on
14 capacity building in Baghdad as well and, two, there is
15 a limited amount we can do in the short-term to help you
16 with this quick impact project?

17 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: No, there was funding available,
18 both directly of the British military, and, of course,
19 there was the CERPS programme, which had a considerable
20 amount of money and the military had access to that too,
21 and that was absolutely right and proper, that that
22 should be available, so that the military could get on
23 and do things that they could see on the ground should
24 be progressed.

25 Look, the other part of the story, I think, in all

1 of this is that ultimately it wasn't about the
2 availability of money. There were very
3 considerable sums that the Americans put in; this was
4 in 2003/2004 the biggest DFID bilateral programme in
5 the world, which was a sign of the seriousness with
6 which we took it; and then, of course, there was the
7 resources that Iraq had, and the Development Fund for
8 Iraq was established.

9 The question was: could you actually move the money
10 and apply it and make things happen on the ground?
11 That's why, if you didn't have the systems in place,
12 trying to build a functioning government, to get
13 decisions being taken -- it is one thing to plan
14 a budget, it is another to then make sure that you can
15 spend the money.

16 Now, one of the things, looking back, you can see is
17 that the ability of Iraq nationally and in the south, to
18 spend money according to budget improved quite markedly
19 over time and that is the legacy of building capacity
20 and it shows the benefit of trying to do both those
21 things: ensure security to the extent that you can, do
22 quick stuff in the short-term, but lay the right
23 foundations in the end for the Iraqis to do it for
24 themselves.

25 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: At the time, in terms of governance,

1 it was the CPA. Did you meet with Paul Bremer?

2 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I did, yes.

3 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Did you get a sense of the role he
4 saw for Britain in the CPA generally?

5 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, we -- of course, he was very
6 aware, as was I, that, in effect, we had taken
7 responsibility in the south. The CPA had quite a task
8 on its hands. I remember visiting the palace in Baghdad
9 where they were located and it did very much have the
10 feel of a post-war set-up, which indeed it was, and they
11 were trying to put, you know, structures and
12 organisation in place.

13 But look, I think it was very clear that this was
14 working very much to the Pentagon in the United States
15 of America. One of the things about the American
16 administration, as you will be only too well aware, is
17 that you have a number of centres of power: Defence, the
18 White House, National Security, State, USAID, which was
19 in most cases my opposite number in relation to all of
20 this, and it was very much the Department of Defence
21 that was running this particular operation. But we
22 talked about a number of things in the first and second
23 visits, because I visited again early-ish the following
24 year.

25 Trying to encourage Paul Bremer to take the right

1 decisions, to get resources to come to the south, that
2 was really quite important, and I think it is fair to
3 say that we had some success as far as that was
4 concerned. Andy Bearpark came in as the director of
5 operations. He had a lot of experience, and that
6 helped. I think Jeremy Greenstock, I have to say, did
7 a very capable job, as always.

8 But we concentrated effort, apart from the capacity
9 building in the centre, frankly, on what we needed to do
10 in the south and to try and get funds to flow to support
11 that.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: This, of course, depended to some
13 extent on the attitudes of the Americans who held the
14 funds. When we took evidence from Jeremy Greenstock,
15 the Chairman asked him if Bremer understood he was
16 responsible to London as a joint coalition partner as
17 well as to Washington, and Sir Jeremy's response was:

18 "I don't think so, no. He didn't act as though he
19 understood that."

20 Now, was that your impression as well?

21 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I would say that was a pretty fair
22 assessment.

23 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So he didn't engage with you as
24 a joint decision-maker?

25 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well -- look, he was in Baghdad. He

1 was the person in charge. He worked closely with
2 Jeremy Greenstock, and Jeremy did have some influence on
3 him, and I think you can see that over time. They --
4 for example, they wanted to proceed with privatisation
5 a lot quicker in a way that we had reservations about.
6 In the end, that didn't come to pass and that was the
7 result of a lot of debate and discussion. But this was
8 a relatively short period of time with hindsight, that
9 the CPA was up and running.

10 I think the other thing was that we were all keen
11 that the move to Iraqi responsibility should take place,
12 and obviously there were steps that had to take place in
13 order to make that happen and Resolution 1483 was very
14 important because that was the start of the process,
15 which was then supplemented by Security Council
16 Resolution 1500.

17 But it was a difficult period for a host of reasons
18 and then we moved to a very different one when the
19 Iraqis began to take responsibility.

20 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just focusing on this period, almost
21 as you arrived -- and it was an interesting question as
22 to whether the timing here was unfortunate -- big
23 decisions were being taken by the CPA and by Bremer on
24 de-Ba'athification and the disbanding of the Iraqi army,
25 so that, in terms of this capacity building, in a sense

1 it was going backwards before it was going forward.

2 In those first days in the job, were you aware of

3 these decisions that were being taken? Were you or

4 Baroness Amos in any position to influence them?

5 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: As I recall, Valerie Amos, when she

6 met Paul Bremer in June, did say that people had said to

7 her that the de-Ba'athification was biting too deep.

8 His view was that it was very popular, as it was

9 reported.

10 With hindsight, my view, if you ask me for my

11 opinion, is I think it went too far, and if you strip

12 out a whole layer, then you have lost capacity. And

13 don't forget there were ideological Ba'athists and there

14 were people who joined the Ba'ath Party because that's

15 what you needed to do to get on. And if you lack that

16 capacity, then there is a problem, and of course it

17 created a lot of people with a grievance, and that, with

18 hindsight, didn't help the security situation.

19 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Did you get a sense of that during

20 your September visit or your early 2004 visit?

21 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Not that I recall, but it became

22 apparent subsequently, as people looked back.

23 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But you didn't have a feel that that

24 was one of the major problems that was --

25 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, capacity was, of course,

1 a huge problem, both because of the nature of the state
2 that had been, that was no longer there, so all the way
3 that it had worked, the signals, how people knew what to
4 do, all of that had gone, everything was up in the air
5 and there wasn't yet Iraqi responsibility for decisions.

6 One of the other difficulties was -- I mean, you had
7 the members of the Governing Council, who were meant to
8 be consulted, but unless you are actually responsible
9 for taking the decisions, and unless you are in the
10 country -- and there were times when people were in the
11 country and they were out of the country -- then it
12 seems to me that you are not really going to make
13 progress. That's why moving as swiftly as possible to
14 the Iraqis assuming control was a really important step,
15 if you were going to have a prospect of sorting this
16 out.

17 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: In terms of an issue we have already
18 mentioned, of getting American funds to the south
19 because we didn't have sufficient of our own, and you
20 indicated that this was a high priority, other witnesses
21 have suggested it was really quite difficult in getting
22 the Americans to release funds for Basra, how did you go
23 about this and how would you evaluate the success you
24 had with that?

25 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: By lobbying, which we did, in time

1 by a different structure being established within the
2 CPA for taking decisions about where money was going to
3 go, which helped improve the flow of funds.

4 We had our own resources from DFID which we put in,
5 the money that the Chancellor gave, as I recall,
6 in March 2003. We had our own reserve, as a department,
7 and as I have already indicated, the sum that we
8 allocated overall in 2003/2004, was pretty considerable.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We heard before that was largely for
10 humanitarian relief. Is that --

11 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Of the -- if you look back over the
12 whole period, DFID put in about 500 -- I think, from
13 memory, £540 million, humanitarian was about £180m of
14 that, but we had a big infrastructure programme in the
15 south, focusing on water and electricity and have left
16 behind some real achievements there, which did improve
17 electricity and water supply for the people of Basra.

18 The ability to spend, both because of the problem
19 with the international institutions who weren't there
20 and, above all, because of the security situation --
21 I mean, I'm sure the committee is very aware of this
22 already, but it had a very, very big impact.

23 Physically, if it is hard to get out, then how are
24 you going to progress things? We used some very
25 creative ways. In the end, Iraqi engineers going out,

1 as I think you have heard in testimony, taking
2 photographs, bringing them back to Basra and discussing
3 it with the DFID team and the consultant team there and
4 saying, "How is the work on reblading the turbines going?
5 What do you think of the progress on the Al Hartha
6 chimney?" just to pick a couple of examples.

7 So we tried very, very hard to carry on with the
8 work, but in some cases, as pylons were repaired,
9 somebody else was blowing them up. So that made life
10 very difficult.

11 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: What you are saying is it was more
12 the deterioration in the security position than the lack
13 of funding that was the problem in the south?

14 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, I would say that. I would say
15 ultimately funding was not the problem, it was the
16 capacity for the things that we were doing, the capacity
17 to actually do that, principally because of the security
18 problems. And it was also about getting funding to move
19 within the Iraqi system. Because one of the consequences
20 of the change was that, in the south, the governor or
21 the Provincial Council would say to us, "We want to have
22 a relationship with you, Britain, we want you to fund
23 us", and there were things that we did, but, ultimately,
24 they needed to be having a conversation with Baghdad to
25 get Iraqi politics working. The same for the Kurds in

1 the north.

2 For the reasons of their history and what they had been
3 through, you could understand, in both cases, why they
4 weren't frantically keen on Baghdad.

5 But in the end, the only way you were
6 going to progress this, to move the money that Iraq had,
7 and has, because of its oil wealth, was to make the
8 politics work, so we would help.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But until the handover in 2004, that
10 relationship with Baghdad was, in fact, a relationship
11 with the CPA rather than --

12 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: It was.

13

14 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So that required putting the effort
15 on the -- on Jerry Bremer rather than on Iraqi
16 politicians.

17 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Absolutely, which is exactly what we
18 did to try and get resources to come to the south and to
19 try and ensure that the CPA were taking the right
20 decisions on how things should progress.

21 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just to clarify a final point on the
22 budget -- I haven't got the figures in front of me, but
23 my recollection was it was something like 200 million
24 that was spend by DFID in 2003/2004.

25 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, I think it was £220m, just a bit

1 more than that, yes.

2 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think we were told that a lot of
3 it was just to keep the Iraqi people fed in these
4 testing times. Is that your recollection as well?

5 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, there was a considerable
6 amount that went on humanitarian assistance and we made
7 a contribution to the flash appeal that there had been
8 earlier in the year from the UN system. We had -- well,
9 a little later on we had the employment programme,
10 trying to create jobs. There were some difficulties
11 with that, which I know that you have heard about, and
12 then the real concentration was on the essential
13 services and the infrastructure, because it seemed
14 a very practical thing that we could do, and you were,
15 as I have said, dealing with a legacy of many, many
16 years of neglect, equipment that was clapped out, and,
17 as soon as you could bring new capacity onstream, or
18 secure it, other stuff would finally give up the ghost.

19 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just staying with the budget, after
20 that 2003/2004 period, it went down to 50/60 million
21 a year sort of (inaudible) and you were having to find
22 this out of your own budget, you didn't have any special
23 contingency to do it --

24 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, as I recall, that's where it
25 came from because the contingency allocation was in that

1 first year, but that period coincided with the Iraqis'
2 capacity both to spend their own money and the
3 availability of those resources improving. Because, in
4 the end, Iraq is a middle-income country, and if you can
5 get the politics right, then it has every chance of
6 progressing after the terrible experience it has been
7 through.

8 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you.

9 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Thank you.

10 THE CHAIRMAN: Just before turning to Sir Martin Gilbert,
11 I wonder if I could ask whether I have understood it
12 right that the principal purpose, if not the principal
13 effect of quick impact projects is really to buy time
14 and consent, given that major infrastructure projects
15 have a long lead time of years and you need in the
16 meantime to acquire, purchase, retain, the consent of
17 the population?

18 It makes it sound as though it is a bit of a purely
19 demonstrative programme, quick impact, but it is
20 presumably more than that. There are real results that
21 flow out of it?

22 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Absolutely, whether it is the repair
23 of a school or painting a community centre or any one of
24 a range of things that the commanders on the ground
25 think would be sensible and people locally have

1 indicated that they would like to have done, and they
2 have absolutely have their place. So this is not
3 a cosmetic plaster on what is going on. It is about
4 trying to do something very practical quickly, hence the
5 name. And the military did have funding, as I have
6 already indicated, but, at the same time, you have got
7 to be putting in place the building blocks for something
8 that is more long-term and more sustainable.

9 THE CHAIRMAN: There is one other aspect of quick impact
10 which interests me and that is how you badge it. You
11 want, on the one hand, to badge it as British military,
12 or whatever it is, for the consent reason, but you also
13 need to badge it as Iraqi because that brings them in.
14 There is a moving balance there?

15 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: There is, and I think you have put
16 your finger on a real tension, because the military are
17 keen to show that, as well as having brought physical
18 security, that there is some improvement. At the same
19 time, if people don't feel that we have a stake, those
20 whose communities and homes it is in what is happening,
21 then it may be less likely to endure.

22 There were times, of course, where the people with
23 whom we were working a bit later on would be saying,
24 "Please don't publicise the fact that this is funded and
25 supported by the British, because it will make it more

1 of a target for attack", and yet, domestically, of
2 course, the public here wanted to know what's Britain
3 doing and what difference is being made. So that is
4 a tension which ran as a thread throughout the whole
5 period.

6 THE CHAIRMAN: There is also a threat to life dimension to
7 it, isn't there? An Iraqi workman who is seen to be
8 associated with ...

9 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Very much so, and I don't know
10 whether you have heard much in evidence about this, but
11 if you think of the Iraqi staff who worked for DFID and
12 the FCO and others, they were unbelievably brave,
13 because they had to go home at night, and I remember
14 having a conversation with one of them, who said, as
15 things got worse, "I take a taxi from home in the
16 morning, to the market. I get out. I get another taxi.
17 I go one day to the back of the Basra Palace, the next
18 day, the front. I vary the time", and that was how he
19 was trying to keep working for us in a place where
20 intimidation was a real problem. And in the end, the
21 Iraqi staff were intimidated out of being part of the
22 operation, and I think it is very important that we
23 acknowledge the part that they played, because they
24 were -- had more stake than almost anybody else in
25 trying to change things for the better.

1 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes, thanks. Martin?

2 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: I would like to look at some specific
3 themes from the end of the CPA in June 2004
4 until June 2007 when you left DFID. Could I start with
5 Whitehall and ministerial strategy?

6 This period saw the introduction in the UK of more
7 formal ministerial committee structures including
8 DOP (Iraq), which was a formal Cabinet Committee. How
9 did these structures affect DFID's interdepartmental
10 relations, particularly with the Foreign Office, the
11 military and the Exchequer?

12 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: It meant that we were all in a room
13 at the same meeting discussing what was going on, what
14 needed to be done, and reaching joint agreement on what
15 we were going to do next. So it was a structure that
16 enabled all of those who had an interest, all of whom
17 had people working in different ways in Iraq, to review
18 progress, set new priorities and make sure that we could
19 get on and make things happen to the greatest extent
20 possible.

21 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Were you satisfied that it was
22 effective?

23 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, I am, because there is no
24 substitute for having the people who have got
25 responsibility meeting together to take decisions.

1 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: As the security situation worsened and
2 you were getting these reports of mounting insecurity,
3 how did you adjust DFID's Iraq strategy, first of all
4 with regard to the capacity building at the centre and
5 then also in the south?

6 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, the physical limitations were
7 very practical- how often could you get out in the case
8 of Baghdad of the Green Zone to visit the ministry where
9 you were seeking to give support. Because I had
10 a particular responsibility, a duty of care, to the DFID
11 staff who were there. It is something I took extremely
12 seriously. I thought about it every day, to be honest.
13 And we needed to make sure that we could manage the
14 security risks to the greatest extent possible.

15 Everybody who was there in Iraq was a volunteer.
16 I think that was very important. They were very
17 committed, unbelievably professional and, frankly, the
18 circumstances in which they were working got
19 increasingly difficult. If you think towards the end in
20 Basra, they would get up in the morning and go to work
21 and be rocketed, and you would look at the chart of rocket attacks
seeing
22 what was happening.

23 So that constrained their ability to move, but, as
24 I said, we tried to be creative, to keep things going to
25 the greatest extent possible, but that was -- if you

1 like, that was an overwhelming constraint, depending on
2 security at any particular time.

3 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: We have heard from Suma Chakrabarti and
4 also John Jenkins about this aspect, and in particular
5 the problems created by needing perhaps to focus on
6 short-term management because of the deteriorating
7 security situation at the expense of longer-term
8 strategies, longer-term objectives. Was this a concern
9 that you shared and did you see a way to deal with it?

10 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, you always have to manage
11 things in the short-term, but if you think of the
12 infrastructure projects in the example I have already
13 given, we tried to adjust how we were doing things to
14 the circumstances, to try and enable those projects in
15 the end to be delivered.

16 When one looks back from this point, you can see
17 that -- well, roughly you know, 1 million people got
18 better or more reliable electricity, a million people
19 got a better water supply in the south as a result of
20 seeing that through, but, of course, we had to adjust
21 the way in which we did that and I have given an example
22 already of how we sought to do that.

23 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: With regard to capacity building?

24 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, that capacity building work
25 continued. If I'm thinking about Baghdad, the support

1 to the Prime Minister's office, which was certainly
2 appreciated, a lot of work with the Ministry of finance,
3 and that continued, people would continue to visit, but
4 the frequency with which they could do that would depend
5 on the security assessment at the time. Some people
6 would come into the Green Zone, if it wasn't possible to
7 get out. And it did have a real impact over time.
8 Because, if you look at the ability to spend money, to
9 start with of the Iraqis themselves, when they took
10 responsibility, to the progress that was made over three
11 or four years, if you like, hard, grinding work to put
12 systems capacity in place, working with them, so that
13 decisions that are taken could actually be implemented.

14 I think it proved that the fact that we decided at
15 the beginning that that was a particular thing that we
16 could focus on, because it was practical, it would have
17 long-term impact and it went to the heart of enabling
18 Iraqis to do it for themselves, was justified by the
19 outcome.

20 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: The reports you were getting at the
21 time gave you confidence that this would be completed,
22 it wouldn't be disrupted or set back decisively in any
23 way?

24 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: You just had to get on with it and
25 deal with the circumstances that you found and adjust

1 accordingly, depending what was going on at the time.
2 There were periods when -- there was the boycott of us
3 in the south because of the problems that there had been
4 in Basra and you just had to deal with those things. But
5 I think the original decisions that were taken to focus
6 on these things were the right ones, but the way in
7 which we delivered them obviously had to be adjusted in
8 the light of circumstances.

9 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: My last questions relate to something
10 which various witnesses have told us concerning the
11 pressure that DFID was under from both Downing Street
12 and also from the military to deliver faster programmes.
13 Sir William Patey told us:

14 "I think the level of ambition was probably higher
15 than the ability to deliver. There was a tension
16 between the desire for instant results and the realities
17 on the ground."

18 Did you feel this in your work?

19 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, of course there was a tension,
20 because, look, everybody wanted to see as fast progress
21 as possible, above all, the Iraqis, given what they had
22 been through, and obviously there was -- I mean,
23 domestically, here, you look at the coverage of Iraq,
24 political debate and so on. People rightly asking, "How
25 is it going? Can we see progress?"

1 But I said fairly early on, I think in one of my
2 letters to the PM, I said, "It is going to be a long
3 hard slog", and indeed it has been a long, hard slog.
4 You had to test all the time your ambition for progress
5 against circumstances on the ground and what could
6 actually be achieved.

7 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Were you able to manage expectations in
8 Whitehall across the different departments?

9 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I think in time, yes, we were. But,
10 as I indicated earlier, the -- in relation to the
11 military -- and I have read with interest the testimony
12 you have had from a number of the commanders, some of
13 whom are slightly less complimentary and some more
14 complimentary. And I also saw what
15 Andrew Turnbull had to say to you about how DFID
16 performed, and I would concur with the views that he
17 expressed to you.

18 There was always going to be a bit of tension
19 because you are operating to different timescales. But
20 if you have a better understanding of each other, in my
21 experience that's the best way of overcoming that,
22 because we are all trying to work towards the same
23 objective.

24 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: The better understanding came
25 through --

1 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, partly through the way in
2 which we worked together, the government structures that
3 you asked me about a moment ago, and applying those
4 lessons, both in the establishment of the PCRU, the
5 Stabilisation Unit, and also applying those in
6 Afghanistan, where one saw some of the same tensions
7 but, frankly, I think worked together pretty well in my
8 experience.

9 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Thank you.

10 THE CHAIRMAN: One of the I think acknowledged successes of
11 the period after the invasion was the capacity building
12 in Baghdad and the key ministries. I wonder if you
13 could say a bit more.

14 Like everything, and you have said it in other
15 contexts, there are tensions between getting something
16 done in the way of good government and showing others
17 how to do it at the risk of it not getting done quite so
18 well until they have learned.

19 Is this a task that comes naturally to people with
20 governmental experiences from a system like ours, who
21 then have to introduce themselves into the post-Saddam
22 chaos, frankly, of a major government department with no
23 experience of good government processes or
24 responsibility-taking or the rest of it? I don't know
25 how you prepare people for that, for the task.

1 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I think the first thing is to find
2 people with the right skills, and you are right, these
3 were very unusual circumstances, so it is very different
4 from capacity building, where there is, you know,
5 security, consent, so I think that's the first thing.

6 But we tried very hard to find people with the right
7 skills and -- look, the real answer to the question is,
8 those who were on the receiving end of the support and
9 advice, what did they think of it, and certainly in my
10 experience there was genuine appreciation, not -- I'm
11 not talking about gratitude, but the things that had
12 been put in place did help the Iraqi system to move, as
13 they were trying to create something that, frankly, was
14 completely new compared to what had been the case in the
15 previous 30 years.

16 Ultimately, it is about effective, functioning
17 government. You know, we have been at it for about
18 1,000 years in this country and we have made the odd
19 mistake along the way, so it shouldn't be surprising
20 that it took some time.

21 THE CHAIRMAN: We have had some testimony that certain
22 things, like, for example, managing the budget process,
23 were learned with remarkable speed.

24 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: There is a lot of skilled capacity
25 in Iraq. That is the point about the country: middle

1 income, resources, highly educated. But the political
2 system had been affected both by what had happened, the
3 loss of capacity because of de-Ba'athification, the
4 chaos and uncertainty and the politics surrounding all
5 of this as the Iraqis took responsibility from 2004, the
6 preparation of the transitional law, the first
7 elections, the second elections. And one of the things
8 that all of that did was that it wasn't entirely clear
9 who was going to have the long-term responsibility until
10 the second set of elections and who was going to be in
11 post. So you'd meet different ministers on different
12 visits. So there wasn't continuity, and that was a bit
13 of a problem.

14 THE CHAIRMAN: We have heard, as you said yourself, a little
15 while back, different views criticising the CPA,
16 including in the south. We have heard less, but it is
17 there to be heard, I think, about the real successes,
18 and currency reform was clearly one. There are others
19 and I wonder if you would just like to put your finger
20 on one or two of them.

21 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, I think actually I will put
22 the currency top of my list, because that was done
23 extremely effectively, and you can get that wrong, but
24 it was got right in those circumstances. That was a big
25 step forward.

1 I think, secondly, there was some progress on
2 infrastructure, although one of the lessons was: you've
3 got to do the right thing. There were some examples of
4 very expensive bits of kit that were bought that nobody
5 knew how to operate, and that reinforced the point you
6 have got to work with the people who have got
7 responsibility for running the system, because they
8 are -- in the end, they are the ones who are going to
9 have to work it in that way.

10 I think some of the capacity building that was done
11 with civil society, because there was this great
12 opportunity, which then became difficult again because
13 of security in those circumstances -
And I think,
14 fundamentally, the most important thing was getting on
15 with the Iraqis taking control of this, because that was
16 the single most important thing it seemed to me, that
17 the international community, through UN Security Council
18 Resolution 1483, in having put in place a process,
19 clarified that in Resolution 1500, getting that up and
20 running was the single most important step because that
21 was really the starting point of Iraq moving forward
22 under its own steam.

23 THE CHAIRMAN: Just one more thing. Under that political
24 development process, there were two tasks which we in
25 the south-east, but also as co-occupying powers, took

1 more widely. One was the recreation of an Iraqi army
2 and that seem to have gone, given time, well. But the
3 other, which has not gone so well we have heard, is the
4 attempt to recreate both the national but also regional
5 provincial police forces. We do not seem to have got
6 the answer quite yet. Is that right?

7 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: That proved to be quite difficult,
8 and if one thinks of the south, the problems with
9 policing there, the problems of corruption, but quite
10 a lot of police trainers came in. I remember meeting --
11 I think it was Douglas Brand who was leading some of
12 that work on one of my visits. I think what that
13 proves is making the change from what there had been to
14 what there needed to be is not something that you can do
15 instantly, frankly, it takes time and it always was
16 going to take time.

17 I think one of the lessons that I draw from all of
18 this is: yes, if there had been better planning, yes if
19 there had been a number of other things done
20 differently, but, fundamentally, given what had happened
21 in that society, lid on, lid off, then it always was
22 going to be quite difficult and I don't think that would
23 fundamentally have changed because all of these things
24 had to be resolved and worked out before Iraq could
25 become more stable and decide what kind of future it

1 wants for itself. And we, of course, have seen a decline
2 in violence which is very welcome, but not complete,
3 look at the bombing which happened yesterday, which
4 shows that there is still some way to go, but the
5 country, of course, now is in a better position to do
6 that than was the case before.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: I think we will take a short break now for
8 about ten minutes and then come back.

9 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Fine, thank you.

10 (2.50 pm)

11 (Short break)

12 (3.00 pm)

13 THE CHAIRMAN: Well, let's resume, if we may. Sir Roderic?

14 SIR RODERIC LYNE: I would just like to pick up one or two
15 of the points that you were making earlier. You were
16 talking about the problem of dealing with infrastructure
17 and the fact that this required different skills and
18 this was something that we heard from your former
19 officials earlier, that DFID was having to do something
20 it traditionally hadn't done.

21 Was the PCRU, which you also described the birth of
22 earlier, an attempt to get a more coordinated approach
23 to dealing with this new set of issues?

24 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, it was. It certainly came out
25 of my experience in Iraq. As I think we have

1 already identified, getting the right people with the
2 right skills in the right quantity in place pretty
3 quickly took some time, and reflecting on that, we
4 thought it would be sensible to build up a group of
5 people, you know, a database of those who had the skills
6 and were ready to go and to be able to deploy them in
7 such circumstances in future. And it was -- as you know,
8 DFID took the lead on this, provided most of the
9 funding. The benefits of that have been felt in
10 Afghanistan, and it is, I think, a very practical
11 example of learning a lesson while Iraq was taking place
12 so that we could apply it there and elsewhere, so that
13 we would have better capacity to do this in future.

14 SIR RODERIC LYNE: The Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit was
15 the first attempt to solve the problem and it
16 subsequently led to the Stabilisation Unit, which
17 I understand now does what you have just been
18 describing. Did you feel the Post-Conflict
19 Reconstruction Unit itself was effective in getting
20 departments to work together on an issue like this?

21 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I mean, it took a little time to get
22 up and running because this was new. It was about
23 creating a resource. The most effective thing to get
24 departments working together, as I indicated earlier in
25 answer to Sir Martin's question is: to make sure that

1 everybody who has got an interest is working together in
2 Whitehall in taking the decisions; to get as much
3 co-location as possible where you are, because, if you
4 are talking to each other on a regular basis, you can
5 have a better understand of what each is trying to do;
6 and another example of that would be the pools, the
7 Africa pool and the conflict pool, which have now been
8 brought together in the one pool. From my point of view,
9 that was a great step forward
10 because if you brought people together with a pot of
11 money, then it helped to facilitate discussion about
12 what you were going to do with it.

13 SIR RODERIC LYNE: We have had differing views on the extent
14 to which these pools succeed or don't succeed.
15 Yesterday, we heard from Lord Walker, who was Chief of
16 the Defence Staff at the time. He clearly wasn't
17 against the idea in principle, but he took a rather
18 pessimistic view of the ability of departments actually
19 to work together in practice and he didn't feel the PCRU
20 had succeeded in that, if I paraphrase his evidence
21 correctly, but that wasn't your perception?

22 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: No, that wouldn't have been my view,
23 I have always been a great supporter of the pools.
24 Certainly, thinking about Africa and the way in which we
25 used those resources, the way in which we worked

1 together in a number of places, I think it was a big
2 step forward compared to what was the case previously,
3 and I think the PCRU and now the Stabilisation Unit is
4 a very practical response to a need that has been
5 identified.

6 Of course, it doesn't provide the whole of the
7 answer, but it means that you are in a better position
8 to do that range of work that is required in these kinds
9 of circumstances. So it is about learning lessons,
10 building capacity to be able to do it better in the
11 future.

12 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Clare Short this morning described what
13 was there previously, in terms of British co-ordination
14 on this issue, as "dysfunctional". Is that something
15 you would subscribe to?

16 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I arrived back at DFID, I think, on
17 16 May 2003, as I indicated earlier in answer to
18 Sir Lawrence. There was, you know, a bit of a residue,
19 a hangover of that, but, frankly, we got on with the
20 job.

21 SIR RODERIC LYNE: No, she wasn't saying DFID was
22 dysfunctional, absolutely not. She was saying the
23 government was dysfunctional in the way that it -- the
24 absence of co-ordination and the machinery of government
25 leading up to the Iraq conflict.

1 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, in truth I can't comment on
2 that period because I was --

3 SIR RODERIC LYNE: You were elsewhere.

4 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I was in
5 the Home Office at that time, but I was just thinking of
6 other examples where we have worked together extremely
7 effectively and Sierra Leone would be a really good one
8 where, when you see what we have done there, absolutely
9 the different bits of government, the military, FCO and
10 DFID working in complete harmony to very, very good
11 effect.

12 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But in the period we are talking about
13 now, where you are Secretary of State, as you recorded
14 earlier there were some tensions and difficulties and
15 problems of understanding between DFID and the military,
16 for example, which we have also heard of from other
17 witnesses, so we have been told that, by the end of this
18 period, this was much improved because people were
19 understanding each other better. It took a long time to
20 get there, if I can put it that way.

21 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, it took a time. Different
22 commanders on the ground had different views in those
23 circumstances, because I think
24 Lieutenant General Figgures, who was there
25 from September 2003 to April 2004, said his experience

1 of DFID was "surprisingly good", which was in
2 contrast --

3 SIR RODERIC LYNE: The word "surprisingly" says quite
4 a lot --

5 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: It depends whether you focus on the
6 "surprisingly" or the "good". Now "surprisingly" may
7 refer to what the prevailing view was, but if actually
8 the experience was good, it seems to me that tells you
9 something.

10 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Okay. You talked earlier about the
11 problem of duty of care and the security of the staff.
12 Obviously, this was an incredibly difficult environment.
13 Are there any broad generic lessons that DFID learned
14 from the great difficulty of having to have staff
15 operating in such an insecure environment?

16 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, I mean, the first point
17 I would make is, obviously, the military are in
18 a different position from civilian staff whether working
19 for the FCO or DFID, and that's the first point to
20 understand.

21 The second lesson is, for civilian staff, you need
22 to have a common approach for everybody, not
23 a difference between departments and that includes
24 a responsibility of the duty of care you have for
25 consultants and contractors whom you have asked to come

1 and work.

2 The third very practical question -- I hadn't
3 anticipated it when I came to DFID -- that we spent
4 money, rightly, on armoured vehicles and close
5 protection support to enable people to do their job.
6 Because that's very practical, provision of hardened
7 accommodation and all of those things that people needed
8 to be as safe as they possibly could. And I think,
9 lastly, as good intelligence as you could have on the
10 ground about the nature of the threat; and as I have
11 indicated already, finding practical ways of enabling
12 people to do what they needed to do, but seeking to
13 manage the risk.

14 One of concerns I have to say I had about staff was
15 that they -- they would carry on with their job. The
16 morale was extraordinary. If you or I were coming to
17 work and we were being rocketed on a daily basis, well,
18 I don't know how we would feel about that, but they got
19 on with the job, and we had to ask ourselves all the
20 time, "Are staff in a position which is too risky,
21 notwithstanding their willingness to get on with the job
22 in those circumstances?". And for me, those were the most
23 important lessons that I learned in dealing with this.

24 SIR RODERIC LYNE: One of the problems of the restricted
25 mobility of the staff was that they couldn't go out and

1 do the hands-on monitoring of the projects, and you have
2 talked about that earlier. We have also heard from your
3 former officials about one case of fraud that occurred,
4 although that was the exception rather than the rule.

5 But given these problems, did you at any point
6 actually think of closing down projects there because
7 you simply couldn't run them in the way that you wanted
8 to run them?

9 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, in the case of the employment
10 projects, when the difficulties came to light, then we
11 did bring those to an end. Overall, as I think you
12 know, when NAO audited the programmes that we had in
13 Iraq, again we got a pretty good clean bill of health
14 and that shows that we do take the responsibility for
15 using public money -- we took it very, very seriously
16 indeed.

17 Yes, you would have to make adjustments, but could
18 people come into the place where the folk who were
19 working on it could meet them there? It was all about
20 what could you do practically in the circumstances to
21 try and keep things going and to achieve the objectives
22 that you had set yourself and that's exactly what we
23 sought to do, but it wasn't easy.

24 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But inevitably, it was not only not easy,
25 it was incredibly expensive, particularly having to use

1 armoured vehicles and so on. Your staff costs, which
2 have been quoted to us, were very, very high, and this
3 was a middle-income country. You ended up spending an
4 awful lot of money in Iraq.

5 Did you, at any point, worry that you weren't really
6 able to deliver the real value for money because of
7 these incredibly high costs and you might have been
8 better off spending that money in a poorer country?

9 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: No, because we had a particular
10 responsibility, for obvious reasons, and, you know, it
11 was our duty to fulfil that responsibility. Because what
12 we were trying to do, Sir Roderic, was to assist Iraq to
13 build something better for itself, and this was a very
14 important objective. And it would have been wrong to say,
15 "Well, we will get up and walk away", and I wouldn't
16 have been in favour of having done that. And, as you
17 know, we reallocated some funding from within other
18 middle-income countries. Of course, you would have
19 direct experience of the decision that was taken to
20 bring the programme in Russia to an end. That was
21 something that we were looking to do anyway. It was
22 accelerated a bit because of the need to find resources.
23 But funding for Iraq did not come at the expense of the money that
we
24 were spending on low-income countries under the policy,
25 which was HMG's policy, that 90 per cent would go to

1 low-income countries and 10 per cent would go to the
2 rest. I think it was right to see it through.

3 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So the bottom line was: even if your
4 staff were costing you a million or a million and a half
5 pounds per year, per head, having to stay behind heavy
6 barriers and guarded walls, with the rockets coming in
7 and not able to get out, it was still the right thing to
8 keep them there?

9 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, it was. Clearly, one of the
10 things we did was to ask ourselves: how many staff
11 should we have in Iraq? Because if people could do what
12 was required and not be in Iraq, well, then, clearly
13 that was very sensible. So we had a team back in
14 London. And the numbers varied according to
15 circumstances and what was possible, and you will have
16 seen that from the figures that have been provided. But
17 when you look at what was achieved in terms of physical
18 improvements in the infrastructure, the capacity
19 building, the training of Iraqi judges and lawyers, the
20 work we did with the BBC World Service Trust training
21 journalists, because that was a whole new world for
22 them, trying to report on what was happening, so people
23 have information to enable the fledgling Iraqi democracy
24 to function.

25 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Where were you training them?

1 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: We were training them in the south,
2 and indeed I recall on one of my visits meeting some of
3 the journalists. Now, that is a very practical example
4 of using the money that we are discussing to try and
5 help Iraq to put the building blocks in place --

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: You could have trained them outside the
7 country, just as the police were trained in Jordan.

8 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I suppose some of the training, but
9 the purpose of it was for them to go out -- this was
10 Al-Mirbad -- to go and report, and for people in Iraq to
11 see what was going on, and that involves going out as
12 a reporter and asking questions and producing programmes
13 and broadcasting them, and you have to do that in Iraq.

14 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you.

15 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I want to cover three areas: One is
16 working with the Iraqi Government; and working with the
17 other partners; and working with the United States. May
18 I just start with working with the Iraqi Government?

19 You, yourself, have said that the -- it wasn't so
20 much there was lack of financial resources, but there
21 was lack of capacity, and maybe not such a high priority
22 given by the Iraqi Government towards reconstruction
23 during this period. What did you do -- who did you talk
24 to, to sort of make sure that they were convinced
25 towards capacity building? What did you do to influence

1 them in that direction?

2 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I wouldn't say that the

3 Iraqi Government wasn't interested in reconstruction.

4 I was trying to describe the constraints under which

5 everybody was working.

6 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I didn't say -- that was your

7 priority in that period?

8 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, it depends which period we are

9 talking about.

10 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I'm talking about 2003 to 2007.

11 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Right. I think the Iraqi Government

12 was interested in reconstruction, but, one, you had the

13 uncertainty of the politics, two, you had the changing

14 personnel, which I have referred to, and once you have

15 got some reasonable clarity about who was going to be

16 there for the medium term, you can see in the extent to

17 which the government was able to function, it took

18 action in relation to security, it was able to spend the

19 budget better, that progress took place. It was an

20 issue that I raised on every visit in my discussions

21 with Prime Minister Ja'afari when he was in post.

22 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: You went in March 2006?

23 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, this was the fourth of my

24 visits. So I visited in September 2003, March 2004,

25 August 2004 and March 2006.

1 This would figure, of course, very prominently in
2 the discussions that we had, both to ask, "Is the
3 support that we are giving on capacity building in the
4 centre helpful?" and we received positive feedback. And
5 also to discuss some of the issues about progress in the
6 south, where, of course, we had a particular interest
7 and a particular responsibility; although at that point,
8 of course, after 2004, political responsibility rested
9 with the Provincial Council.

10 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Do you think that our development
11 programme was realistic, given the political
12 circumstances?

13 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, I think it was. There were
14 constraints in making bits of it happen, as we have
15 discussed, but, yes, I think it was the right thing to
16 do and I think we picked the right range of activities.

17 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you thought we were moving in the
18 right direction, despite --

19 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, because you had to focus your
20 effort and you had to do what was practical and we
21 wanted to put time effort and attention into things that
22 were going to help in the longer term and that's what we
23 sought to do.

24 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: We have been talking earlier about
25 resources, but I think in 2006 Iraq gained an estimated

1 \$20 million windfall from the global oil prices. Was
2 it right for us to continue to invest British taxpayers'
3 money, given that they had their own resources?

4 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: It was, as we have already discussed,
5 it was a diminishing amount. In the first
6 instance, given the circumstances, it was right to put
7 a lot of money into humanitarian, it was right that in
8 2003/2004, £220 million, our biggest bilateral programme.

9 But what you are describing is the crossover as Iraq
10 and the government built its capacity to take decisions
11 and it had the resources. And the task always was in the
12 end to move the money that Iraq itself had in the
13 interests of achieving the things that the
14 Iraqi Government and Iraqi people want.

15 There has undoubtedly been progress in making that
16 happen and our capacity building played some part in the
17 system.

18 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you thought it got better over
19 the years?

20 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: The ability to spend their own money
21 undoubtedly got better over the years. The figures show
22 that.

23 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Then we had a great deal of
24 sectarian violence and faction politics at this time.
25 What was our negotiating strategy between yourselves,

1 your colleagues in the Cabinet and the Iraqi Government?

2 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, it was to try and see what we
3 could do to help them to deal a way through this, and
4 I think the principal thing was supporting the political
5 process, because that is the only way that is going to
6 be resolved.

7 Fundamentally, people have a choice to make: do they
8 think that they have a place in the new Iraq and the
9 emerging democracy or not?

10 Now, if you look at Sunni participation in the first
11 round of elections, it was quite low. If you look at
12 Sunni participation in the second round of elections
13 in December of that year, in 2005, and there was
14 a change, because in that community there was
15 a recognition, "We want to be part", you can't be part
16 if you don't get your people elected. And, therefore,
17 the political process I would say was the single most
18 important thing, because getting your politics right is
19 the only way you are going to sort this.

20 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Was our strategy effective?

21 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, if you look at the progress
22 that has been made, yes, I think it was the right thing
23 to have done, because, ultimately, it is about the
24 Iraqis taking responsibility, sorting their politics,
25 taking their own decisions, because that's the only way

1 you are going to come out of the trauma and the history
2 and the violence -- and it is by no means over because
3 there are still some people in Iraq who are blowing up
4 their fellow Iraqis because they don't see that as part
5 of their future. But it is the only future for the
6 country. I mean -- and very clearly the view of Iraqi
7 politicians and elected leaders.

8 THE CHAIRMAN: Could I, just before you move on, Usha, ask
9 about the nature of the political development process in
10 Iraq? A hugely complex scene, as you have described.

11 How explicit was an objective, both for the
12 coalition and indeed for ourselves, the United Kingdom
13 Government, to bring about, not merely a built capacity
14 for conducting politics, but to conduct politics in
15 a democratic way? Would Iraqi politicians in office, or
16 aspiring to it, have sensed themselves being guided,
17 mentored, pushed into a particular way of doing things
18 as opposed to the way they would naturally fall into
19 doing things?

20 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Thinking from my many discussions
21 with Iraqi politicians on my visits and in visits that
22 they made to the UK, it was difficult and it was
23 a different way of doing things to that which they had
24 experienced. But I think there was a great thirst for
25 the opportunity that this change provided, but in a very

1 short space of time they were having to work through, as
2 your question refers to, Baroness Prashar, all of the
3 tensions that there are in Iraq because of what has
4 occurred and -- but there was a lot of determination on
5 their part, it seems to me, to make it work.
6 Lakhdar Brahimi is the first UN rep who played a part in
7 bringing this about.

8 In the end, the test of it is whether it is a system
9 that works, that people support, subscribe to,
10 participate in, but it is not just our view that this is
11 the way forward for the country. I think it is very
12 clearly the view of the politicians who have been trying
13 very hard to make it work at great personal cost.

14 I mean, one of the things that struck me very
15 forcefully, I remember meeting Aquila Al-Hashimi on my
16 first visit and she was then assassinated. It is quite
17 sobering. We have debate and argument in this country,
18 and the worst you can do to me is to say, "I disagree
19 with you", and kick me out. It is something else again,
20 if you are putting your life on the line, to build
21 something different and better. And I had a huge respect
22 for those Iraqis that I met and talked to who were
23 trying to do that in very difficult circumstances.

24 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. One last point before returning
25 to your questions. I think we have heard that the

1 Americans in particular did a huge polling on their own
2 account to test public opinion in the whole of Iraq.
3 Was that part of our contribution to the political
4 development process, to understand how the Iraqi people,
5 different aspects of it, were responding?

6 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes, it was, because it was very
7 important information about how people were feeling and
8 it gave an indication of how the changing circumstances
9 on the ground altered, how the Iraqis felt about how
10 things were going, whether they were optimistic or
11 pessimistic for the future.

12 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes. As a matter of interest -- I don't know
13 what the answer is -- whether the kind of polling that
14 we, but certainly the Americans were doing, was this fed
15 back to the Iraqi political community?

16 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: That's a very good question and I do
17 not know the a answer to that. All I know is that we
18 saw it and looked at it and used it to inform the
19 decisions that we were taking. I would be surprised if
20 it wasn't, but others might be able to advise you better
21 than I can.

22 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

23 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Can I ask another question following
24 on from that?

25 Of course it was the right thing to do. Was the

1 capacity building just being done by DFID or were there
2 other actors involved in it? Was there liaison between
3 yourself, FCO and other partners?

4 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: There was very close liaison at all
5 times and we were all clear about who was doing what in
6 support of this process.

7 Obviously, the FCO would be taking the lead on the
8 political process itself, DFID was leading on the
9 capacity building and some of the other projects and
10 programmes that I have described, and I mentioned the --
11 well, the journalists and the judges' training, because
12 that is part of creating a culture of doing things
13 in which democratic politics is able to operate. Trying
14 to tackle police corruption, to go back to your
15 question, Sir John.

16 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Can I just move on to the other
17 partners? I mean previous witnesses have detailed the
18 challenges created by low engagement of the World Bank
19 in Iraq. With hindsight, do you think they could have
20 engaged earlier?

21 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, I wish they had been able to,
22 but I think there were two things going on. One was
23 . That the World Bank

24 didn't have as much experience in really fragile and difficult states.
They were more used

25 to working in places where there was stability and then

1 you got on with the task in hand.

2 Secondly, the security situation had a huge impact
3 on them as it did the United Nations, the Red Cross and
4 others. It was a source of -- I have to say, some
5 frustration to me that, having put 40 million of our
6 70 million pledge to the multilateral trust funds into
7 the World Bank, it was moving so slowly.

8 It was a point I raised repeatedly, as did
9 officials -- and you have had evidence to that effect --
10 with the President of the World Bank to try and get them
11 to move, and at one point we were discussing unpicking
12 commitments that they had entered into because they
13 would say, "We have entered into commitments", and we
14 would say, "But nothing is happening, because you can't
15 actually implement them", and it made it more difficult
16 because, as -- it was a means of support that in other
17 circumstances you would normally have that wasn't there
18 for those reasons.

19 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I mean, the UN scaled back also
20 after August 2003, and when we discussed this with
21 Sir Suma Chakrabarti, he had some observations about the
22 role that the World Bank and the United Nations can play
23 in such situations. Do you have any observations on
24 that, as to what role the World Bank and the
25 United Nations can play?

1 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: A hugely important role. If you
2 look at other parts of the world, it is part of the
3 international community's response to countries that are
4 in difficulty for a variety of reasons and each brings
5 particular strengths, and it is when we work together
6 that we can have best effect. So tried and trusted
7 partners weren't there in the way that would normally
8 have been the case, and that did make it more difficult.

9 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I think he was talking about who
10 should be taking the lead. Should it be the World Bank
11 or the United Nations?

12 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: They have got different sides of the
13 street to work on, really. The World Bank would
14 traditionally lead on infrastructure and, I think
15 Dr Shafik, who gave evidence to you, of course worked in
16 the World Bank before, and that's what they would
17 typically pick up and get on with. So that had an
18 impact. The UN would traditionally play a role in the
19 political process and they did through Lakhdar Brahimi
20 in particular, and other things, and that was a function
21 of the particular circumstances that obtained in Iraq
22 and the background and the history, and principally the
23 security.

24 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But he also mentioned the role of
25 the UNDP, because he was really saying who should be

1 leading post-reconstruction.

2 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Normally, the UN would take the lead
3 but there were particular circumstances in Iraq because
4 of the military action, the responsibility that the UK
5 and the United States of America had as the occupying
6 powers in that first period, and then there was
7 a transfer to Iraqi control.

8 Frankly, there was more than enough work for
9 everybody to do, but I do think one of the lessons --
10 and we may come on to this -- I hope we do, a little
11 later on -- for, you know, the international community
12 is: how can we be more effective in dealing with
13 fragile, difficult, post-conflict states? Because there
14 is a very long list of countries where the experience
15 has been different. Some more successful than others.

16 I think it is very important, as a world -- and I'm
17 a great supporter of the United Nations, because it is
18 the instrument that we have fashioned to try and deal
19 with these things, but we don't yet have all of the
20 means or all of the capacity or the political will, and
21 I think it is very important that we do create those
22 things because, if we don't do that, a lot of people
23 will continue to suffer.

24 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I mean, working with donors was not
25 something that the Iraqis were actually used to, and of

1 course you had the Madrid donors' conference where you
2 got this money. Any observations on that?

3 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: That's a very, very important point.
4 So there wasn't a tradition, and that meant that you
5 were having to build new relationships. But what the
6 Madrid donors' conference was about was, if you like,
7 the second phase of the international community coming
8 in to support this, regardless of what people felt about
9 what happened in March. And there were a whole load of
10 views internationally as well as domestically.

11 1483 and 1500 was the United Nations system saying
12 "Okay, but here is a framework, here is the authority to
13 do various things. This is what we want in terms of
14 political process", and the donor conference was about
15 getting funding in to help the country to recover from
16 what had happened over a number of years.

17 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Of course, I mean, the US kind of
18 dwarfed the UK efforts in terms of financial, military
19 and civilian personnel. What impact do you think that
20 had on the UK in the circumstances? Suma Chakrabarti
21 has talked about not quantity but quality. Would that
22 be your view too?

23 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: We were always going to be a lot
24 less in terms of money and personnel, and also troop
25 contributions, but -- so we focused on the things where

1 we thought we could make a difference. We focused on
2 the things that we thought were priorities and we worked
3 very hard to try and make them happen, and I think,
4 looking back on this from this particular vantage point,
5 those were the right things to have done, and it did
6 have some impact on American thinking.

7 For example, seeing the benefit of an Iraqi-led
8 approach. I think you saw a change of attitude. The
9 civilian-led PRT model, which had been pioneered in
10 Afghanistan, Kalilzad brought that along with others to
11 Iraq. And I think recognising that big-scale projects
12 that don't actually work, don't make a lot of sense,
13 and, therefore, smaller ones that are going to help fix
14 the problem in the short-term or keep the electricity
15 capacity going while you try and make a more fundamental
16 change, I think that was an important lesson too.

17 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But the other point which

18 Sir Suma Chakrabarti raised, which I think is much more
19 about this special relationship, but he put it
20 differently. He said:

21 "The question we really asked ourselves across
22 Whitehall, which is one of the big lessons for me is, if
23 we are going to be in a military exercise with the
24 Americans, we are always going to be a junior partner.
25 If that's the case, we still have shared accountability

1 and responsibility."

2 In terms of his asking where you should draw the
3 line, what do you say about that?

4 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: We did have shared responsibility
5 for obvious reasons. We had jointly engaged in
6 military action. We had shared responsibilities as
7 occupying powers and we expressed our views on a range
8 of things: the political process, the way decisions
9 about security and justice, as well as the things that
10 we had been focusing on in terms of reconstruction, and
11 we had got on with the task, but I think you have to
12 recognise the scale of the contributions that the
13 Americans made. It was always going to mean that the
14 relationship was going to be affected by that and,
15 therefore, we had to focus our activities.

16 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But is this a point at which we
17 should draw a line as to what is the minimum level in
18 terms of shared responsibility? Because Andrew Turnbull
19 said: what's the level of power and influence that would
20 be acceptable, the minimum level, before we take on
21 shared responsibility and accountability?

22 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I think it would be quite hard to
23 work out how you would draw up a set of rules
24 beforehand. There had been some discussion about
25 Memoranda of Understanding, which I think we wanted and

1 the Americans weren't terribly keen on in those
2 circumstances.

3 Look, I think it is one of the lessons that we would
4 need to reflect upon, but that balance reflected the
5 degree of input from the two nations, and it is not that
6 we were without influence, because I don't think that
7 that is the case. But we concentrated our effort on
8 where we thought we would be able to have most influence
9 and that's why we prioritised the things that we did.

10 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But DFID's sort of counterpart had
11 always been USAID, and they lacked political influence
12 over the direction of US policy. How did that affect
13 our ability to exert influence?

14 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: It meant that conversations with the
15 administration were rather difficult, both because of
16 the different power centres, and because, as we tend to
17 deal with our opposite numbers in whatever job we have
18 got, Andrew Natsios was my opposite number. But, as you
19 have already heard as a Committee, he was not at the
20 heart of the decision-making in the American administration
21 and that made it difficult, to be frank.

22 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Are there any lessons that you would
23 take away from Iraq in terms of operating in the US
24 dominant environment?

25 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, there are lots of lessons that

1 we will take away from Iraq, and it is hard to --

2 THE CHAIRMAN: I was going to ask you at the end for your

3 general reflections, if I may, but I think Usha was --

4 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Mine was a specific one in terms of

5 working in Iraq in a US-dominant environment. What are

6 the lessons to be taken away --

7 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I think for me the principal lesson

8 was to try and move to Iraqi ownership and

9 responsibility as quickly as possible and together we

10 achieved that relatively quickly, although, as I said,

11 it seemed like a long time, at the time, by the time we

12 got to June 2004.

13 I think the other lesson is the extent to which

14 there is a willingness to let go, because, in the end,

15 you can't run it yourself, whoever you are, as a nation

16 from outside. You have to support people to run it for

17 themselves, and for me that's the most important lesson

18 of all.

19 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you.

20 THE CHAIRMAN: I would like to ask just a couple of

21 questions about the concluding part of the period, when

22 we were withdrawing from the south, our military

23 commitment.

24 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Yes.

25 THE CHAIRMAN: Really to ask, there was a common policy as

1 I understand it, to return political authority as
2 rapidly as was practicable to Iraqi politicians,
3 including in the south. There was also strong pressure
4 to draw down military commitment.

5 Those two things are heading in the same direction
6 at more or less the same speed, but was there a time
7 right at the end when the withdrawal of the security
8 potential, which the British military presence could
9 still give, started to hamper the continuing work of the
10 civilian reconstruction in the south?

11 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: No, I wouldn't say that. I mean,
12 the two marched in parallel. We were always very clear
13 that when the British military presence went, then the
14 DFID presence in the south would also have to go,
15 because -- it comes back to the discussion we had about
16 duty of care. There was -- of course, there was all the
17 politics of Basra at the time, the question of the
18 extent to which Baghdad was prepared to come and support
19 what was required to sort out some of the problems, and
20 the Charge of the Knights in the end had quite an
21 impact. And there was also, of course, the debate about
22 the extent to which the presence given, the attacks that
23 were taking place, was providing a target in those
24 circumstances. And so there was withdrawal to the
25 airport and the co-location that came from that.

1 But you have to come to the point at some point
2 where you are going to say, "Right, it is for you to
3 take the lead in those circumstances", and I think it
4 was a natural progression. I think the timetable was
5 right, in my view, and so it happened.

6 THE CHAIRMAN: Leaving behind a considerable rolling
7 programme of projects in the south as well as in the
8 whole of Iraq, of course.

9 We have heard some evidence, not a lot, about how
10 one maintains some degree of scrutiny, and, indeed,
11 a view of the progress being made after the withdrawal
12 on the projects that run through.

13 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, yes, but that, of course, was
14 after my time --

15 THE CHAIRMAN: It was indeed, yes.

16 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: -- because I left in June 2007.

17 THE CHAIRMAN: Would you like to reflect?

18 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: So I don't have knowledge of the
19 period thereafter and, therefore, the period of
20 withdrawal, I'm just reporting from what I know more
21 generally.

22 Look, you have a continuing responsibility to make
23 sure that the public money that is being put in is being
24 used to good effect. You have to have a way of
25 monitoring progress, and that's something that DFID does

1 day in and day out in its development programmes all the
2 way round the world.

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes, sure. I have got one other question
4 which is really still about political development and
5 how the British contribution to it was perceived.

6 It was Mark Lowcock who gave us evidence to the
7 effect that our policy was to work both at the national
8 level for Iraq, as a country, but also at provincial
9 level for the south-east in Basra, and, indeed, the
10 other local provinces, and that there was not a tension
11 or difficulty there, he said, but it led me to wonder
12 afterwards whether the United Kingdom presence at the
13 political level was seen as essentially pro-Basra,
14 pro-Shia south, as against other interest groups and
15 areas in the country as a whole.

16 Did you pick up anything about it, from your talks
17 with politicians in particular in Baghdad?

18 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: That's a very interesting question.
19 Obviously there were tensions, Iraqi tensions, between
20 Baghdad and the south, for reasons of history and
21 politics and other things. I think it was -- it was
22 clearly -- I think, in the end, it was an advantage for
23 us that we had those two perspectives, because we were
24 able to bring the two together in the policies that we
25 pursued and the discussions that we had, but it took --

1 I think it took some time for Baghdad -- the
2 Iraqi Government in Baghdad to ensure that resources
3 were flowing.

4 So getting the politics working between Basra and
5 Baghdad -- and, as I have already indicated, I thought
6 it was really important that that happened. So you
7 didn't just have bilateral relations coming out this way
8 because you needed to get it working that way. I don't
9 think, in the end, that it was a difficulty if we had
10 not been not south and we had just been in the centre.
11 It gave us an added perspective, we had
12 a responsibility, and we had to apply both sets of
13 experience to what it was we were seeking to do.

14 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I have only got a couple of other
15 questions before inviting your own reflections.

16 One is -- we have touched on it already this
17 afternoon, and, indeed, with other witnesses -- DFID,
18 the British Government, and the British taxpayer did put
19 in this very large contribution over the period, 400
20 million or 500 million probably, in that region.

21 Now, there is a value for money argument, which
22 I think we are not pursuing any further. We don't need
23 to. But there is also a question of the relative
24 resources of Iraq, with the oil price and its growing
25 prosperity, as to whether there is any case for some

1 kind of cost recovery.

2 In 1991, the costs of expelling Iraq from Kuwait,
3 Saddam's Iraq from Kuwait, was in part borne by other
4 countries in the region, our costs were in part borne by
5 others. There has been, so far as I'm aware, no
6 suggestion that there should be any kind of costs
7 recovery request or demand for the rebuilding of Iraq by
8 the coalition. But is there?

9 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: In my view, no, I don't think that
10 would be a very sensible thing to seek to do.

11 THE CHAIRMAN: Because it was our decision to invade?

12 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, partly that, but
13 principally because of what the country has been through
14 and I just don't think that would be a good idea,
15 frankly.

16 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes, I can see that it doesn't sit with
17 forgiving debt, for example, but there is, on the other
18 hand, this -- the plain fact of the matter that, even
19 though you, within the DFID budget, was able to spare
20 the poor countries the 80 per cent or 90 per cent, there
21 was some degree of subtraction from other deserving
22 country cases in the middle-income group at any rate,
23 for which, if you take the whole of Iraq's oil income
24 between, say, 2003 or 2007/2009 they didn't actually
25 need financially at all, but they got it.

1 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Look, I think, the Iraqi people over
2 a very long period of time have been through a pretty
3 bad experience, and I just don't think that would be the
4 appropriate thing to ask or to do in these
5 circumstances. We did what we did for reasons everybody
6 understands, even if they don't all agree with it, and
7 the resources that we put in and the effort that we
8 made, and continue to make, was right and proper in the
9 circumstances. But I don't think that's an avenue down
10 which I think it would be wise to go.

11 THE CHAIRMAN: I would like to ask my colleagues if they
12 have any last questions.

13 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just one. We have been talking
14 about a period when the everyday lives of Iraqis went
15 from bad to worse in terms of the security situation
16 when the monthly death toll was rising and thousands
17 were dying in the -- after the Samarra mosque bomb and
18 so on, and we know in the government there was a degree
19 of real anxiety that the policy might end in what was
20 described as strategic failure.

21 You have given us a sort of picture of pushing on,
22 doing what you can, trying to improve, thinking of the
23 long-term, but did you ever share that view? Were you
24 ever worried this might end up to be more than just
25 a waste of resources, a total waste of efforts, ending

1 with a far worse situation than the one with which we
2 had started?

3 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Of course, at the height of the
4 violence everybody was worried about what was going to
5 transpire. It was terrible, what the Iraqi people were
6 experiencing at that time and everybody was anxious,
7 above all the Iraqi people and their elected
8 politicians.

9 But thankfully, things have improved since then and
10 the violence has subsided. In the end, it is
11 a fundamental choice between politics or violence,
12 frankly. But, yes, it was a very, very worrying time
13 and the loss of life was terrible.

14 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Do you think that the policies that
15 we adopted around the 2006 -- 2006/2007 period, which
16 was essentially to move the troops out -- our troops had
17 been identified, and we heard something of this
18 yesterday, as part of the problem in terms of their
19 prominence in Basra, and to reduce our liabilities
20 there -- would have persevered -- we would have
21 persevered with those whether or not the situation was
22 getting better in the country as a whole, that we had
23 almost reached the limits of what we were able to do and
24 it was in a sense as much about good luck as good
25 management that things were turning out all right in the

1 end, and the story now was not quite as unhappy as it
2 seemed likely to be in 2007?

3 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: I wouldn't say it was a question of
4 luck at all. Ultimately, progress had been made -- and
5 it remains a very fragile democracy -- by the efforts of
6 Iraqis themselves. Action on security, including what
7 happened in Basra in the Charge of the Knights,
8 political accommodation, people deciding they are going
9 to come into politics and renounce violence. It is
10 a combination of all of those things that has
11 enabled some progress to be made. But it is by no means
12 over yet, as the continuing violence demonstrates. But
13 it is less than it was at the peak of the insecurity and
14 that does represent progress. But it is progress that
15 the Iraqis have made with our support and help.

16 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you.

17 THE CHAIRMAN: Mr Benn, we would welcome your final
18 reflections on the experience of your time in DFID,
19 looking at the Iraq situation through all the period.

20 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Well, it was a very -- obviously
21 a very particular set of circumstances. And we have
22 discussed in some depth the -- what we tried to do and
23 how we learned from that. For me, the single most
24 important lesson -- it comes back to the point I alluded
25 to a moment ago -- for the world -- because in the end

1 it is all of our responsibility -- what do we do about
2 states that oppress and murder their citizens and create
3 a threat to others.

4 Now, every conflict is different, but I reflect
5 on those nearly four years in DFID. When you think
6 back to Rwanda, where the world actually stood by and
7 did nothing, 900,000 people were killed.

8 You think of Sierra Leone, where we went in while
9 the RUF and the West Side Boys were chopping peoples'
10 arms and legs off with machetes, and I think the part
11 that we played there has led to Sierra Leone being in
12 a much better position now than was the case in the
13 past.

14 Kosovo, without a UN Resolution, in the end the UK,
15 the US and some other countries decided we weren't going
16 to stand and watch anymore, in this case Moslems and
17 others, being murdered in Europe's backyard.

18 Darfur, the Congo, 3 to 4 million people have died in
19 the Congo, some from violence, most from ill-health.
20 I can't tell you how many because there was nobody there
21 to count. Afghanistan, Iraq.

22 As I reflect on all of those things, what are we
23 going to do as a world to stop those things happening?
24 How are we going to build the capacity and the means to
25 do something about it? I want the United Nations to be

1 the body that has the ability to do it. But if I may put
2 it in this way, if any of those people in those
3 circumstances were aware of the charter of the
4 United Nations and what it says, they might have been
5 inclined to say to us as a world, "When are you going to
6 come and apply it to me? Does it mean anything to me?"

7 My final observation would be simply this: there are
8 always reasons that can be advanced for not trying.
9 Always. But it seems to me the greater mistake is not to
10 try at all, and for me that's the most important lesson
11 that I reflect, both on Iraq, but also on a number of
12 other countries that I had responsibility for dealing
13 with during my time as the International Development
14 Secretary, which changed profoundly the way in which
15 I think about and see the world.

16 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much indeed, and I'm grateful
17 to you and to those of you who have been in the room
18 this afternoon. We are going to break now, having
19 concluded this session, and we will resume at about
20 4 o'clock to take evidence from Sir Peter Ricketts as
21 Permanent Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth
22 Office.

23 RT HON HILARY BENN MP: Thank you, Sir John.

24 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

25 (3.49 pm)

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(Short break)

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