

IRAQ INQUIRY

Additional Evidence of the Rt Hon Geoffrey Hoon

Introduction

1. Prior to making this statement I gave evidence to the Iraq Inquiry on one occasion only, on 19th January 2010. I was not invited back to give further evidence. Having examined the evidence available to the Inquiry, in particular evidence given by other witnesses, it appears that there are matters that I was not asked about but on which I have knowledge that is highly relevant to the Inquiry's deliberations. It is in relation to those matters that I make this statement of additional evidence.

My background and experience before 2002

2. I was appointed as Secretary of State for Defence in October 1999, after serving previously as a Minister in the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. By the time of the events with which the Inquiry is concerned, I had had significant experience of the way in which Tony Blair organised his government in all three ministerial ranks, as well as during more than two years as the Cabinet Minister responsible for the Ministry of Defence.

The Workings of Cabinet

3. Since I joined the Cabinet more than two years after Tony Blair became Prime Minister, the pattern of the organisation and format of Cabinet meetings was by then well established. Tony Blair was well known to be extremely concerned about leaks from Cabinet discussions, commenting on more than one occasion that he did not want to read about that day's meeting in that day's edition of the Evening Standard. It was my perception that, largely as a consequence of this, he did not normally expect key decisions to be made in the course of Cabinet meetings. Papers were submitted to the Cabinet Office, and in turn by the Cabinet Office to appropriate Cabinet Office committees for decisions. Decisions were made at officials' level or between Ministers; the aim would be to resolve any differences of views between departments by Minister to Minister engagement. I can recall that he was criticised in the media at one stage because some Cabinet meetings had lasted for as little as thirty minutes. Later he developed a practice of inviting Cabinet Ministers to make presentations to their colleagues about the work of their departments. Whilst this provided an invaluable insight into what was happening elsewhere in government, these were very clearly not decision making discussions. This format and pattern did not change when I served in the Cabinet of Gordon Brown.

4. I do not believe that in terms of the day to day operation of his government Tony Blair treated the Ministry of Defence any differently from any other department. In general terms he left the conduct of the department including the Armed Forces to me as Secretary of State, but became involved in person in respect of wider questions of policy or principle. It was nonetheless absolutely standard practice to ensure that all significant decisions e.g. relating to procurement issues, were reported or submitted to Number 10, and this often occurred on a daily basis by means of a note between private secretaries.
5. My initial period in the Ministry of Defence had involved the conduct of deployments in two theatres in the Balkans as well as significant operations by British forces in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. There were also continuing military responsibilities in Northern Ireland and the Falklands. I was therefore familiar with the decision making processes required. I do not recall in relation to any of those military operations that there was a specific Cabinet level military based discussion about the nature and risks involved in any military deployment. In my experience it did not appear that anyone, anywhere in the government or civil service, believed that this was expected or required. This was not least for operational security reasons. The specific details of any proposed deployment would have been sent to the Prime Minister in correspondence and circulated to other Cabinet Ministers and government departments as appropriate. It was clearly for the Prime Minister to decide what Cabinet discussions took place and when they occurred.
6. At no time when I was serving in the Ministry of Defence were other Cabinet Ministers involved in discussions about the deployment of specific forces and the nature of their operations. Relevant details would have been circulated to 10 Downing Street or other government departments as necessary. In the five and half years that I was Secretary of State for Defence I do not recall a single Cabinet level discussion of specific troop deployments and the nature of their operations.
7. Given the level of activity undertaken by Britain's forces during that period, had it been settled practice that this should happen, it would have occurred on a number of occasions. It would clearly have happened if the Prime Minister had wanted it to happen. It would also have happened if it had been specifically required by the Ministerial Code. I do not recall at any time any advisor, either military or civil servant, suggesting to me that there was such a requirement. I am confident, given the importance attached to the Ministerial Code by Ministers and officials, that at some stage a civil servant from the Ministry of Defence, 10 Downing Street, the Cabinet Office, or other government department would have raised the issue had it been necessary to do so. None ever did so on any occasion.

Decision-making within the MOD

8. By the time of the events with which this Inquiry is concerned I had developed, in the light of relevant experience in relation to both Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, what seemed to me to be the appropriate way of securing the relevant information and reaching decisions. This involved, where time and circumstances permitted, extensive informal discussions, followed by a written paper containing conclusions that would be circulated where necessary both internally and beyond the department. I encouraged wide ranging discussions amongst both the military and officials and regularly involved my private office in the process.
9. Given the fast moving nature of events affecting the Ministry of Defence during my time in the department, it was common practice for senior military and civil service personnel to "drop by" my office to talk through the latest developments or discuss details of any proposed response. As Lord Boyce made clear in his evidence to the Inquiry on 3rd December 2009, "I saw the Defence Secretary, not only daily, but more often than daily, certainly as the tension was building up....". These would not be formal meetings, and would not necessarily appear in my diary. Nevertheless they could last some considerable time and they allowed me to test the advice that I was receiving in the course of what could sometimes be quite vigorous discussions. As a lawyer I liked to question the evidence to ensure that it stood up to scrutiny. If time permitted for example I preferred that I should receive advice on options rather than a specific conclusion that the department had already decided on. I believed that this allowed for better and more open discussions rather than advisors having to defend previously entrenched positions.
10. I obviously recognise that there are other ways of reaching important decisions, but this was the process which I found best helped me to reach the informed decisions I needed to make. At no time in my five and a half years in the department did any senior official or Chief of Staff question the appropriateness of the process that I followed.
11. As the issue of possible US military intervention in Iraq became increasingly discussed in the early part of 2002, there was a wide range of views in the Ministry of Defence about the question of UK involvement. For example, the long experience of patrolling the no fly zones over southern Iraq was a significant factor in those discussions. There was increasing concern about the risks involved in these operations and the consequences for example if a British or American aircraft was shot down. It was certainly speculated at the time that this could lead to military intervention to rescue downed personnel; and that such operations could lead to a wider engagement.
12. Whilst there were those in the Ministry of Defence who had policy and legal reservations about UK involvement in a possible invasion of Iraq, there were

others who equally clearly believed that we should participate. Given that the events of 9/11 were still strong in people's minds, I would say that the overwhelming majority of views from people within the Ministry of Defence expressed to me at the time recognised that, whatever their position in principle, it was inevitable that the UK would become involved. I was aware that there were different views on the legal basis for use of force, but no concluded view had been reached that an attack would be necessarily unlawful. The issue was not straightforward and there were differing legal views; that was primarily a matter for FCO Legal Advisers, in conjunction with the Attorney General.

13. As other departments became involved in these discussions, it was clear that there was a similar range of views around Whitehall. At a meeting called by the Prime Minister on 23rd July 2002 there was a very full discussion of the relevant issues. Arguments both for and against UK involvement as well as relevant legal opinions were set out and recorded in the minutes of the meeting. All of the reservations set out in the summary prepared by my private office were fully debated in the meeting. At such a meeting I would not have thought it necessary to repeat arguments already made by others, simply because I had departmental advice to the same effect, unless there was some specific benefit in doing so.
14. I always recognised that military advice can be over-ambitious. There is certainly a "can do" attitude amongst the British military. I recognised this from my previous experience of operations and made allowances for it as necessary in the formulation of my views and my decision making. Nevertheless it had to be recognised by ministers and officials across Whitehall that the military were responsible for providing professional military advice and I equally recognised therefore that it would have been wrong to ignore the military advice that I received; any more than I would have ignored the diplomatic advice I received from the FCO or the intelligence advice received from the security services.

Advice from Officials

15. I was never advised either formally or informally by the then Permanent Secretary, Sir Kevin Tebbit, to the effect that there should be a discussion among Cabinet colleagues about the proposed UK deployment to the south of Iraq. Sir Kevin suggested in his second open oral evidence session on 3rd February 2010 and again in his third closed evidence session on 6th May 2010 that he sent me what he referred to as a private handwritten note to this effect, around Christmas 2002. If he did send such a note, I did not receive it. There is no record of it anywhere. Had I received such a note it would have been delivered most likely in my box; or, if it was delivered directly to me or via my personal secretary, we would have ensured that it made its way into the box. All notes, including private ones, would have been handled in this way. I would have then marked it to say

that it had been read, together with any further comment or question I might have had, and I would have returned it in the box. In those circumstances it would have been recorded and filed by my private office. That is precisely what happened in respect of a private note that I did ask Sir Kevin for in respect of the risks to our wider relationship with the United States of not being involved on the ground in Iraq. That private note was sent to me and received by me and appears in the official record because it went through the process that I have previously described. If it was important to have such a discussion amongst Cabinet colleagues I would have expected to receive formal advice to that effect.

16. This was shortly before a Cabinet Meeting on 16th January 2003 which to the best of my recollection was devoted entirely to the efforts to secure a second UN resolution, and was the subject of an unusually wide-ranging discussion. The Prime Minister made it very clear that he wanted to focus all of his government's efforts on securing that second resolution. I am quite confident at that stage that he would not have welcomed any efforts to discuss the military options in relation to Iraq. In the absence of Prime Ministerial agreement to such a discussion, it could not have taken place. Indeed in his evidence to the Inquiry, Lord Turnbull, the Cabinet Secretary from 2002 to 2005 said that when Cabinet met on 9th January 2003, ministers were told that "nothing was inevitable" because "we are pressing the UN button". He went on to say that, "I could see that he did not want key discussions of... who was going to bring what forces to bear, where, and there is some sense in that". Nevertheless because I thought colleagues should be aware at this juncture about the military preparations under way, and because this had not been discussed at the Cabinet meeting on 16th January on the second resolution, I arranged for a paper on this subject to be circulated.

Decisions and planning for invasion and post-conflict Iraq

17. The final decision in principle as to whether the UK should become involved in the military invasion of Iraq was ultimately taken by Parliament. Prior to that there had inevitably been a great deal of practical discussion over many months in the Ministry of Defence and in other government departments to ensure that the operation, should it go ahead, and our role in it, would be successful. It was clear that success was not simply a matter of victory in the initial conflict, vital as that would be. The definition of a "winning concept" included post-conflict administration and reconstruction in Iraq.
18. This was in the first place a matter for military advice, but additionally involved other government departments, in particular the FCO and DFID.
19. There was as well a significant US dimension that was at times difficult to predict and impossible for the UK to control. We could seek to influence the US but it

would be unrealistic to suggest that we had an effective veto – other than the threat of complete withdrawal from operations.

20. The use of such a threat would ultimately have had to be decided by the Prime Minister. He never indicated to me either formally or informally that he would consider such a course of action. In those circumstances it would have been totally unrealistic for me to have considered this as a sensible or practical approach. Moreover the decision in principle to deploy forces was taken by the Prime Minister on 17th January 2003. Whilst questions were raised about the aftermath, no-one at the time appeared to believe that they should delay the decision on troop deployment. In response to a number of FCO questions about the aftermath, Sir David Manning commented to the Prime Minister,

“Good questions. But I don’t think they affect your decision in principle [*to deploy forces*]”.

Shortly afterwards the Prime Minister agreed to the Ministry of Defence’s proposals.

21. Judgements as to the appropriate level of military contribution, and the necessary preparation and resourcing were in the first place matters for military advice. Whilst I acknowledge that I was ultimately responsible for deciding and communicating these judgements to the Prime Minister and other government departments, there was no reason at the time why I should have rejected the military advice that I was receiving (as described above, I tested it where I thought it necessary – for example, troop numbers were an issue and I asked questions about numbers and distribution across southern Iraq.) That military advice was given as I understand it, with the full awareness of the advice given by other government departments. Indeed as I have previously mentioned, representatives of both the FCO and DFID routinely attended the regular Chiefs of Staff meetings at the time.

22. I believed in early 2003, on the basis of my appraisal of the military advice that I was receiving, that there was an adequate civil/military plan for the post-conflict period in Iraq. The military aspects of the plans were prepared in the first place by my military advisors in the Ministry of Defence. I relied on their military judgement and at the time I had no reason to doubt the adequacy of their proposals. Moreover the civil aspects were the ultimate responsibility of other departments and again I had no reason at the time to question their judgement as to what was required. There was, moreover, from the perspective of the military, effective coordination with other government departments at official level in respect of the meetings of the Chiefs of Staff and military planning. As Lord Boyce made clear in his evidence to the Inquiry on 3rd December 2009,

“...sitting at my table in addition, obviously to the Chiefs of Staff, were very senior representatives of the Foreign Office, Number 10, Sir David Manning

himself would come along, and also the intelligence agencies and DFID and the Home Office where appropriate”.

23. Clearly with the benefit of hindsight different judgements could and perhaps should have been taken – but my considered view at the time was that there was no good reason for me to reject or significantly amend the military advice that I received on the adequacy of the post-conflict plan. All of those judgements were made at the time on the basis of the likely risks that would have to be faced following the invasion of Iraq. I had a considerable number of discussions about the likely risks with military and other advisors. As a result I was confident that the military advice that I received was based on the best military judgement of those responsible for giving military advice.
24. One issue of particular importance was the question of why UK forces were assigned responsibility for the southern provinces during the reconstruction period. This decision in fact followed naturally from the decision that UK forces would remain in the south during the invasion period, while US forces pressed on to Baghdad. UK military commanders more than once made the point that this region was likely to be more straightforward to administer than provinces further north would be. Their rationale, as I understood it, was that the area was both ethnically and religiously relatively homogeneous, in contrast to the north where the relations between Sunni and Shia and between Arabs, Kurds, and Turks were always likely to prove highly problematic. These judgements were made, as I understand it, on the basis of a detailed military assessment of the different options.
25. As I indicated to the Inquiry in the course of my oral evidence, I accept now with the benefit of hindsight, that the balance of our preparations could have been different. As the result of strong and persistent advice from DFID we were very concerned about the potential humanitarian consequence of the invasion. I had been told on many occasions by the then Secretary of State for DFID that around 60% of the Shia population in the south of Iraq were dependent on UN food aid and that this assistance would stop as soon as military action began, with the clear risk of a humanitarian catastrophe. This was confirmed by the meeting convened by the Prime Minister on 13th February 2003 when it was concluded that the UK “should seek to take the lead on humanitarian issues in the southern zone of Iraq”. The responsibility for coordinating this work was clearly placed with the FCO. As a result the initial emphasis of the MOD in respect of the aftermath involved ensuring that there was access to supplies of food and water to feed the people that we would become responsible for in southern Iraq.
26. Ultimately, and again with the benefit of hindsight, we should have been more concerned about the potentially difficult security situation – but initially that was not a significant problem. On two visits to Iraq, I walked around Basra with soldiers wearing berets (an indication that sniper fire or significant disorder was

not considered a serious threat) who freely and comfortably interacted with the local population. The draft Operational Concept for Phase IV submitted to the Chiefs of Staff by Lt Gen Reith on 25th March 2003 stated,

“Anti-Coalition sentiment is predicted as low in all provinces”.

27. As the security situation deteriorated, action was taken by the military to ensure that there could be a robust response where needed. But even if a larger UK contribution had been deployed, it is not clear, given the size of the area involved, whether this would have made any significant difference to the security situation on the ground in particular places. I recall a conversation with an elderly Iraqi in Basra. He explained that local concerns about security were a reflection of the fact that Saddam Hussein's regime ensured that there was a police officer on duty on every street corner. It was never the intention of the UK's armed forces to emulate this quantity or style of security.

28. The size and style of the military deployment was a matter for military advice based on a careful and realistic analysis of UK military capabilities. At the same time other government departments were working out the nature and scale of their contribution. It was of course recognised that there were reputational risks associated with creating a region where the UK had a high profile. Sir David Manning summarised the position for the benefit of the Prime Minister on 16th April 2003,

“My own view is that we should accept the risks and lead a regional office to cover area for which we have military responsibility”.

29. That judgement also reflected my views. We were aware of the risks but believed that our plans for managing them represented the best hope for promoting Iraq's speedy recovery from the conflict and from the damage previously inflicted by Saddam's regime.



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Geoffrey Hoon

2 April 2015