

9 November 2007

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MOD CIVILIANS IN OPERATIONAL THEATRES

1. We spoke briefly at the end of the last S20 meeting about the long term sustainability of our policy of using MOD civilians in operational theatres. I am not querying the value of the S20 work nor the valuable contributions of civilians in past and present theatres, but I have started to worry about whether we are right to continue on the current course in high risk environments such as Iraq and (increasingly) Afghanistan, especially as the latter campaign looks likely to endure for many years. I have delayed writing this until visiting at least one theatre – Iraq, where I talked to a wide range of civilians (including FCO and DFID) and officers about the issues.

2. My starting point is our current strategy work on Afghanistan, which suggests that

That assessment reflects Taliban tactics as well as the approach taken consistently by AQI and other groups in Iraq. If we lost MOD civilians in that way, we would come under heavy criticism (fair or not) for putting non-military people at undue risk in war zones. The same concern is already leading the FCO to spend £37M pa on providing PMSC protection for their (relatively small number of) staff in Iraq. It has also introduced a risk averse culture which is preventing MOD civilians embedded in the Embassy and working in the Iraqi MOD from doing their jobs effectively – to such an extent that I am increasingly inclined to start pulling them out.

3. I would oppose following the FCO and DFID down the PMSC route, for a range of political and presentational reasons, but it is true that however well we prepare our people, they will not be trained to the same standard as Service personnel. Moreover, the growing difficulty we are having in filling posts suggests that some – many – will not be as suitable as we would wish. I am not at all sure that all of the civilians I met in Iraq would pass the new S20 fitness and health tests, while many have been given T&G promotion well above their grade.

4. I am a long way from discovering solutions for this conundrum but I am increasingly clear about the following factors:

- sooner or later, we will have civilians killed 'in action';
- much of what they are doing at present is a legacy of the more benign environments of the Balkans and post-TELIC 1 euphoria;
- I get no sense that anyone is auditing the kind of roles now filled by civilians against the much more hostile circumstances faced in Iraq until recently and increasingly in Afghanistan. For example, we learned in Basra that the senior policeman there spends most of his time on the phone 'mentoring' his Iraqi contacts – the SofS was not the only one to ask why that could not be done from the UK with equal effect and much more cheaply. The same might apply to our finance staff – with any requirement

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for a forward based presence filled by appropriately trained Service personnel;

- against that background we should minimise the number of non-essential civilian posts in operational theatres;
- there are, however, a small number of posts (especially POLADs and perhaps scientific and contracts staff) which must be filled by civilians, either because they have responsibilities it would be wrong to place on someone in a uniform obliged by military law to obey orders (i.e. POLADs) or because it is unrealistic to expect the Services to develop the skills needed to fill them (e.g. Scientists);
- if our evolving strategy for Afghanistan is adopted, there will be an increasing requirement for POLAD-style posts working in potentially life-threatening circumstances, with language skills and cultural knowledge, and serving long and (in career terms) more frequent operational tours – the FCO, DFID will have similar needs;
- the right people will not volunteer for these posts simply for the money. We should therefore listen to what the current generation say will continue to motivate them;
- supporting people prepared to put their lives in danger – above and beyond the level of support provided to other civilians – should be a core function of MOD's civilian HR organisation alongside SCS and talent management. It cannot be done properly as an adjunct to PJHQ or Policy/Commitments since it involves more demanding requirements and skill sets than line managing their own staff;
- as part of this active management process, people who do well in the smaller number of residual posts should be rewarded in career terms – they are, after all, what distinguishes us from most Government Departments;
- we need to think through with the FCO, DFID coherent and sustainable approach to our duty of care (at present we are less risk aware than the FCO in Iraq but more risk aware in Afghanistan!).

5. This is a big agenda. It probably comes within my remit as Policy & Commitments [Skills Champion] to lead on, at least at the outset. My instinct is to begin by gathering together a fairly large sample of past and present civilians who have filled the very wide range of posts in the theatres concerned to brainstorm the problems and possible solutions. Realistically, that is unlikely to be possible until the New Year. I will also talk through with Deborah Loudon how the work should be undertaken (I already have an exercise in hand on defence advisers in MODs but this goes much further and cannot be done by Pol/Cts). But I would welcome a discussion with you and copy addressees at an early stage to test or reinforce my prejudices.

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