

1 (2.00 pm)

2 THE CHAIRMAN: Good afternoon.

3 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH

4 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: Good afternoon.

5 THE CHAIRMAN: Welcome back everyone who was here this
6 morning and welcome to everyone who has joined us for
7 this afternoon's session, and welcome to our witness
8 Dominic Asquith.

9 This afternoon involves a jump in time. Our
10 witness, because of his overseas commitments and
11 responsibilities, can't attend a hearing later, but we
12 now have to move from the period up to 2003, where we
13 have been looking at military planning, to the start of
14 building a picture of events in Iraq between 2004 and
15 2007 and to set it in a context.

16 From 2004 to 2006, you were, I think, Director Iraq
17 in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London, and
18 then for the following year you went to Baghdad as
19 HM Ambassador.

20 I remind every witness that they will later be asked
21 to sign a transcript of their evidence to to the effect
22 that the evidence they have given is truthful, fair and
23 accurate. I will now, if I may, hand over to
24 Sir Roderic Lyne, to start the questioning.

25 Sir Roderic?

1 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you. As Sir John indicates, this
2 is the first time we have really looked into this period
3 and you are someone who has spent a lot of your career
4 in the Middle East, or dealing with the Middle East,
5 from London, including with Iraq from this period of
6 2004 onwards. Of course you have been in Baghdad
7 before, as the Deputy Chief Commission.

8 From that perspective, I think it would be very
9 helpful if you can just tell us what the situation was
10 in Iraq at the time that you took up the post of
11 Director for Iraq in the Foreign Office in October 2004.
12 By this period, the Coalition Provisional Authority had
13 been in operation for quite a long time. There was an
14 interim Iraqi Government under Dr Allawi, and if you can
15 then run us through the main elements of how the
16 situation developed until the period when you left the
17 post from being Ambassador in Baghdad nearly three years
18 later.

19 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: In the previous incarnation before
20 I was Director, I was, as you say, in Baghdad at the end
21 of the Coalition Provisional Authority, the CPA, which
22 was the period of trying to set up the interim
23 government, and we were working to a timetable that was
24 set out in early March under an agreement with the Iraqi
25 political leadership which would have the interim

1 government established by the handover from the CPA at
2 the end of June, which would then be followed by
3 elections for provincial councils and for the
4 National Assembly, the transitional Parliament
5 in January 2005, followed by a constitution which needed
6 to be drafted and then put to a referendum
7 by October 2005, and then completion of what was called
8 the political process with further national elections
9 in December 2005.

10 So the focus was on ensuring that that political
11 timetable was kept. But it was in a context, certainly
12 from early April 2004 through to the end of that year,
13 of considerable violent activity from an insurgency,
14 both from the Sunni Arab side in terms of what were
15 called former regime elements of ex-Ba'athis, but also
16 foreign elements in Iraq, and then, on the Shia side, an
17 insurgency from Moqtadr Sadrs, the Sadrists militias,
18 which created intense difficulty in pushing through both
19 the political process and the reconstruction and
20 capability-building of the Iraqi Government at the time.

21 To give you a sort of example, in the beginning of
22 2004, there were up to 20 security incidents a day. By
23 the time we were putting together the interim
24 government, it had risen to 120 and then it sort of
25 levelled at around about 70 a day. So that was the

1 context in which this process was being pursued.

2 It was an interim government from the middle of the
3 year which was unprepared for taking on the role of
4 government for a number of reasons. We can explore
5 those, if you like, later. But it had an insurgency to
6 fight and at the same time a capacity problem.

7 The key objectives were to build up the capacity of
8 the Iraqi security forces, that's both the army and the
9 police, and to accelerate that Iraqi-isation of the
10 security elements, to build up the capacity of the
11 interim government and to prepare, as I say, for the
12 elections in January.

13 But also, there was the beginning of a recognition
14 at that point to bring in more actively the
15 international community, both in the form of the
16 United Nations, which had, under the Security Council
17 Resolution, voted through in June of 2004 -- had
18 a leading role in some of the key bits of the political
19 process: the elections and the constitution, but also,
20 to broaden the burden, if I can put it that way, the
21 international community in terms of helping Iraq to
22 build up its political and administrative capabilities.

23 The January elections 2005 were boycotted by the
24 Sunni Arab community for a couple of reasons. One,
25 there was the -- the first was that there had been

1 a very violent conclusion to the insurgency just outside
2 Baghdad in Fallujah, which had been directed principally
3 against the Sunni Arab community, but they also, in
4 their hearts, I think, were unwilling to face the
5 prospect of being the second community, the second to
6 the Shia, since they had, of course, up until then
7 controlled the politics of Iraq.

8 The result of the Sunni boycott of those elections
9 lived with us for some time because they were largely
10 unrepresented or under-represented in the Parliament
11 that emerged out of those elections. That said, the
12 turnout for the elections was high. There were
13 8 million voters out of 14 million registered. But the
14 Shia Alliance, the alliance of Shia parties, took about
15 half the votes and the Kurds and the party of
16 Ayad Allawi, the Prime Minister of the interim
17 government, pretty well shared the rest.

18 Nevertheless, although one of the effects of the
19 elections was to further alienate the Sunni Arab
20 community, there was, interestingly -- I went back to
21 Iraq at the time, February, with an American-led mission
22 to look at how we helped the transitional government, as
23 it was then called, build up its capability and deliver
24 services. There was an upswing in optimism inside Iraq
25 as a result of the elections and interestingly, too,

1 amongst the international community, and you could see
2 that latter development as the year progressed.

3 In the middle of the year, the EU presidency at the
4 time, and the Americans, co-chaired an international
5 conference in Brussels at the end of June where
6 80 countries participated. So there was a sense amongst
7 the international community that the political process
8 needed to be supported and the transitional government,
9 too, needed the support.

10 The problem was that the momentum that had been
11 injected into the political process by the elections was
12 squandered because it took four months for the Iraqi
13 leadership to form its transitional government. That
14 was a problem that beset us at exactly the same time the
15 following year, which I will come to, but revolved
16 principally around a Shia unwillingness -- an
17 unwillingness on the part of the Shia to concede
18 a majority role in government and, for them, a majority
19 role, it was very difficult to concede anything from
20 a monopoly at the same time.

21 They eventually agreed amongst themselves
22 a Prime Minister, by which time -- this was in April --
23 we were getting close to the point at which the
24 constitution needed to be drafted, which was August. So
25 considerable work then went in, with the UN leading the

1 effort in helping a Committee drawn from the new
2 Parliament to draft a constitution, which was then put
3 to a referendum in October.

4 It was difficult to secure Sunni Arab acquiescence,
5 support or endorsement of the constitution, but there
6 was provision made at the last minute for a further
7 review of the constitution the following year, which at
8 least secured sufficient votes in the referendum, or
9 votes from the Sunni Arab population in the referendum
10 that then happened in October. The referendum secured
11 in the mid-70s, I think, almost 80 per cent vote for the
12 constitution, but it was clear from the voting that
13 there was much less support for it in the Sunni Arab
14 areas.

15 We then moved to ensuring that the December
16 elections could take place. It was clear that a lot of
17 work needed from the January elections -- it was clear
18 that a lot of work needed to be done to persuade the
19 Sunni Arab community to participate. We succeeded in
20 doing so and the results of the December elections
21 indicated a much better turnout from the Sunni Arab
22 community and they secured just short of 20 per cent of
23 the seats.

24 Before I leave 2006, I should also point out one key
25 event in that year towards the end, in November, which

1 was to secure from the Security Council a further
2 resolution, mandating the presence of a multinational
3 force. Its mandate under the previous resolution, 1546,
4 was due to expire at the end of the political process,
5 in other words, with the December elections, but it was
6 quite clear that it was a requirement for
7 a multinational force to continue in Iraq to help with
8 security and that was secured by a unanimous resolution,
9 resolution 1637, in November.

10 2006 opened in much the same, rather frustrating
11 way, as 2005, and it took even longer for the Iraqis to
12 agree their government, stretching until the end
13 of April to secure consensus around a Prime Minister,
14 Nouri Al-Maliki, and then another month or so to put the
15 rest of the Cabinet into position.

16 That period was characterised, though, by even worse
17 violence than the previous year, sparked by an attack
18 in February by Al-Qaeda on a Shia mosque in Samarra,
19 a shrine north of Baghdad, which in turn generated over
20 the next four days, but much longer, particularly over
21 the succeeding week, a bloodbath, where over 1,300
22 Iraqis, mainly Sunni Arabs -- though that's an
23 estimate -- were killed in intermilitia fighting on the
24 Shia side, largely prompted by the separatist brigades
25 and it was the beginning of the period where the

1 militias were effectively all over the streets, taking
2 the place of the Iraqi security forces and starting that
3 process of Balkan-isation of Iraqi but particularly of
4 Baghdad.

5 When Maliki formed his government, the focus again
6 was to increase the capabilities of the security forces.
7 It was nominally -- it was a government of national
8 unity. When I arrived in the August of that year, 2006,
9 my initial impressions, which I sent back, was that, for
10 a government of national unity, I found that most of the
11 members were in opposition to each other and, as one old
12 Iraqi politician told me, in any other period in Iraqi
13 history there would have been a coup d'etat, but the
14 multinational forces were preventing that. It was
15 a period of intense friction.

16 The Shia, again, determined to maintain a monopoly
17 in government and yet felt threatened by the Sunni Arab
18 community, by ex-Ba'athis, by Al-Qaeda, by their Arab
19 neighbours, a theme which we may want to explore later,
20 and indeed by the coalition; threatened in the sense
21 that they were concerned that somehow their majority
22 status would be undermined.

23 The Sunnis still felt excluded. They had not come
24 to terms with the fact that they could not exert
25 decisive influence by right and on their own terms and

1 they needed to demonstrate that they were opposed to
2 Al-Qaeda and to the Saddamists and to the religious
3 extremists. The Kurds themselves were feeling
4 vulnerable and had, as they said, no neighbour to call
5 on, which they felt the Shia Arabs and the Sunni Arabs
6 had, and the Iranian influence with the Sadrists,
7 particularly with the Sadrist brigades, was extensive.

8 So it was an unpropitious context in which to be
9 operating, and the summer of that year, 2006, was
10 effectively the battle for the soul of Iraq. It was the
11 period when security plans were rolled out for Baghdad
12 by the coalition forces and the Iraqis, which were aimed
13 at bringing the violence in Iraq to manageable
14 proportions and creating a space for politics to work,
15 because at that point there was too much violence.

16 At much the same time we were facing an increased
17 violent threat in Basra, which I'm sure you will want to
18 come to later.

19 For the period -- from the period when I arrived,
20 the focus was on trying to create a more effective
21 centre of government, a partnership between the
22 Prime Minister, Maliki, and the other political
23 leadership, and on the security side, increasing the
24 capability of the security forces, Iraqi security
25 forces, to assume responsibility, to take over command

1 of the provinces, which had been set out as an objective
2 back in the middle of 2005. President Bush said at the
3 time, "As Iraqis stand up, we will stand down". That
4 was the lead-in to what was called eventual Iraqi
5 control, handing the provinces from the coalition to
6 Iraqi command.

7 That process of handing them over began towards the
8 middle, it went through the second half of 2006,
9 including some of our provinces in the south-east, and
10 then there was a real debate at the end of 2006 with the
11 American administration over whether one should go fast
12 to a bridging transition to Iraqi control, which would,
13 I think, require coalition forces to stand back, Iraqi
14 forces taking much more of a lead, but a hefty dose of
15 mentoring and embedding of advisers in Iraqi units, as
16 a way to transition control and, therefore, draw down
17 forces. That was the debate on one side.

18 On the other, was a more aggressive operation
19 against the militias, to win, effectively, every set
20 piece, but to combine that with a more effective hearts
21 and minds campaign, reconstruction, what they called
22 "clearing" the areas holding them and then building
23 them.

24 At the beginning of 2007, the debate went in favour
25 of the more aggressive approach, with President Bush

1 announcing at the beginning of January that the extra
2 surge of American forces, which was in line with the
3 thinking of the new American commander of the
4 multinational forces, General Petraeus, and it was
5 combined with a more integrated, sophisticated,
6 counter-insurgency campaign to win the hearts and minds,
7 which developed into dealing with the Sunni Arab
8 population in the three Sunni Arab provinces to the west
9 and north of Baghdad, and bind them into -- the attempt
10 was to bind them into the political process, but at the
11 first instance to arrange a series of local ceasefires.

12 2007 saw also another Iraqi-led security operation
13 in Baghdad to pacify the streets and to put Iraqi
14 security forces visibly on the streets and to take the
15 space away from the militias. That carried all the way
16 through until the surge, the American surge, came in
17 later the year.

18 I think the other key point, the last point, is the
19 international aspect, where, in May of 2007, was
20 launched what was called International Compact for Iraq,
21 which had been a year in gestation but which was, in
22 practice, a compact between the international community
23 and the Iraqi Government. On the Iraqi Government side
24 a commitment to serious reform, economic and political,
25 and on the international community side, sustained

1 support for its economy.

2 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you. You have described a long and
3 acutely difficult period for the people of Iraq, and,
4 indeed, for the coalition and there are a lot of things
5 within that period that we will wish to follow up on,
6 not just today, but in subsequent hearings.

7 I would just like to dig a little deeper into the
8 insurgency and then I think Sir Lawrence will want to
9 ask about the way that we handled policy over this.

10 As we have heard from earlier witnesses, while there
11 were differing views, both in the UK and the USA, about
12 what we could expect after the toppling of
13 Saddam Hussein, effectively nobody in the policy-making
14 community had anticipated an insurgency on the scale
15 that happened. Some have implied that it wouldn't
16 really have been possible to envisage this.

17 Given that it built up in the way that you have
18 described, how did the coalition react to this? How
19 long did it take the coalition to really understand what
20 was going on and to gear itself up to deal with this
21 insurgency; in fact, not a single insurgency but, as you
22 have rightly said, insurgency in two different
23 communities?

24 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think I can only speak for the time
25 that I was engaged in this, because there were a number

1 of relevant factors but they were before I arrived.
2 I think it is fair to say that initially the coalition
3 military response and the policy response was to treat
4 it as a counter-terrorist problem; in other words, to
5 take the militias on, the insurgents on, militarily,
6 where they were.

7 That evolved over time on slightly different tracks.
8 My perception is that, on the British side, we were
9 quicker to recognise that, in terms of the Sunni Arab
10 insurgency, there was a requirement to try and reconcile
11 those who were reconcilable, but those who were at that
12 stage standing outside of the political process. That's
13 what we spent a lot of time in 2005, after the January
14 elections, which the Sunni Arabs boycotted, trying to
15 do, trying to explain to the Sunni Arabs who were
16 standing outside the political process and to some
17 extent supporting the insurgency, that they were -- that
18 that course of action was disastrous for them in the
19 medium and long-term. It would put them continually
20 outside, away from the chance of shaping the political
21 process which was going to roll out through 2005.

22 But the underlying principle in all of those
23 exchanges was that they had to accommodate themselves to
24 a different political structure in Iraq and had to
25 accept that they needed to demonstrate loyalty to an

1 Iraqi Government. They could not fall back into the
2 position of thinking that they would rule Iraqi as they
3 wished.

4 In parallel, though, the -- in the case of the --
5 let me just complete that thought. That also required,
6 beside talking to those that we thought were
7 reconcilable amongst the Sunni Arabs, it involved many
8 conversations with Arab neighbours and not neighbours
9 and near neighbours, as well, of Iraq, who were
10 inevitably suspicious of a Shia government in Baghdad,
11 many of whom had spent much of their time in Iran in
12 exile, and who were, through their refusal to engage
13 with successive Iraqi governments, in our view, lending
14 support in terms of moral support to a rejectionist
15 Sunni Arab community. So it needed handling on those
16 two tracks.

17 The Shia insurgency was a more difficult operation
18 to engage with, partly because some of the political
19 parties in the Shia Alliance were close to or depended
20 for their political support on the constituents in the
21 areas where the Shia militias were operating and
22 providing, in effect, protection to the Shia communities
23 from Sunni Arab or Al-Qaeda attacks and there was always
24 an ambivalence on the part of the Shia political
25 leadership about how hard to deal with the Shia

1 militias. But there again, it was clear to us that
2 engagement of some kind was required with the Shia --
3 the political arms of the Shia militias.

4 I think, as 2006 -- the second half of 2006 and
5 certainly through 2007, the American attitude moved much
6 more towards the direction we had been engaged upon,
7 witnessed by the efforts in the first half of 2007, by
8 General Petraeus and his multinational forces to engage
9 some Sunni Arab tribes in the Sunni Arab provinces, to
10 throw off the militias that were positioned there, and
11 Al-Qaeda groups, and to engage in, as I said, local
12 ceasefires, with the aim, in time, of those local
13 ceasefires spreading more broadly across the country,
14 and, in parallel, towards the time I was leaving, again
15 an American interest in engaging some of the Shia
16 militias in the same sort of dialogue.

17 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Now, by the time you took on your
18 responsibilities in late 2004, the coalition forces had
19 long since ceased to be seen by Iraqis as an army of
20 liberation to the extent that they ever had been, and
21 were seen as occupiers and, indeed, had that formal
22 status in international law and then this developed, as
23 you said, into a multinational force with the
24 authorisation of the United Nations.

25 Can you tell us how the Sunni and the Shia

1 communities in general viewed this force, which was, as
2 you have said, when it prevented the likelihood of
3 a coup, essentially the only element providing security
4 and limiting instability in the country? What was their
5 attitude to it and, indeed, what was their attitude also
6 in this period to the United Nations?

7 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: Towards the multinational force I would
8 characterise it as an ambivalent one. There were
9 always, up until the time I left, they were always --
10 but this was true of all three communities, the Kurdish,
11 the Sunni Arab and the Shia Arab. They were always
12 afraid of a precipitate withdrawal of multinational
13 forces, because the lack of capability of the Iraqi
14 security forces to deal with the insurgency, the
15 military threat, from the militias and from the
16 terrorists, and from the Sunni Arab community, who felt
17 throughout very sharply, from the beginning of 2006, an
18 almost existential threat from Shia militias, the
19 multinational force was their protector in whom they had
20 more trust than the Iraqi security forces, particularly
21 from the Iraqi police, so far as, the latter they saw as
22 being heavily infiltrated, as indeed it was, by ex-Shia
23 militias.

24 So there was a real concern that when multinational
25 forces withdrew, it should be done in a context where

1 Iraq didn't descend into civil conflict or civil war.

2 That's the one side. The other side is the
3 ambivalent side, which was an understandable desire
4 particularly on the part of Prime Minister Maliki, for
5 Iraq to take control over its territory, for an Iraqi
6 Prime Minister to be in command of the disposition of
7 military forces around his territory. That was why
8 there was the push behind the transition of the
9 provinces, stage by stage, to Iraqi control, to
10 demonstrate on the one hand that the Iraqi security
11 forces were improving in their capabilities and,
12 therefore, were capable of assuming command, and, on the
13 other hand, that Iraqi sovereignty was being extended.

14 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you.

15 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: It is very interesting, I think, for
16 us to hear, although it is out of sequence, what was
17 coming up as the war itself came to an end.

18 Thinking of some of the things that were envisaged
19 in March 2003 and what had come to pass, I wonder, from
20 the Iraqi point of view, as you were talking to them,
21 where they thought the coalition had made its biggest
22 mistakes.

23 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: It was before my time, but I'm happy to
24 give my opinion.

25 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I'm not asking you your view, but,

1 when you arrived, presumably there was -- even those who
2 had hoped for great things from the coalition, there was
3 a degree of disillusionment. So really I'm asking you,
4 in your time, what was the analysis of what had gone
5 wrong?

6 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: It depended on the community you were
7 talking to. The sharpest criticism came from the Sunni
8 Arab community for the decisions taken early on to
9 outlaw, to de-Ba'athify, to outlaw ex-Ba'athis from
10 taking any role in government or the security forces and
11 to disband the Iraqi army in toto. That's where they
12 felt that, in terms of two key decisions, they were
13 being affected themselves.

14 They also criticised the coalition for relying on,
15 excessively in their view -- this is the Sunni Arab
16 perspective, against a context of dominating Iraqi
17 politics up until that point -- of relying too heavily
18 on Shia Islamist political leaders and ones, indeed, who
19 had lived most of their political career in exile, and,
20 therefore, were divorced from the Iraqi people, and for
21 therefore entrenching in the political structures
22 a sectarianism which they felt we could never rid
23 ourselves of.

24 From the Shia perspective, there was less criticism
25 of the decisions made by the coalition, principally

1 because they were the beneficiaries, and I think the
2 same could largely be said of the Kurds, who were
3 allowed to retain the gains they had made the previous
4 ten years, the last ten years of Saddam, and to preserve
5 their somewhat different status up in the north.

6 As my period went on, particularly the last year and
7 a half, the Shia community felt more disquiet about the
8 possibility that the coalition, recognising the deep
9 sectarian tensions in Iraqi society, would put pressure
10 on the Shia political leadership to make, as they would
11 see it, concessions, and for them, politics was a zero
12 sum game, any concession on their part was seen as
13 weakness, and was something that was going to favour the
14 Sunni Arab community.

15 So they were concerned that the deep sectarian rifts
16 were going to prompt the coalition to pressure them, the
17 Shia leadership, to make those concessions.

18 Therefore, that, in large part, explains the other
19 criticism, if it is -- but criticism that was sometimes
20 presented to us, and to me personally, particularly as
21 regards Basra, the reluctance, as they saw it, of the
22 coalition to hand over control for areas that --
23 security control to the Iraqi forces.

24 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you. How much was there
25 a problem of a failure to get basic services going and

1 the economy moving and so on? Was that seen as the
2 coalition's fault or just a question of the security
3 situation? How was that being ...?

4 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think under the Coalition Provisional
5 Authority, that's up until June 2004, we were seen as
6 a CPA fault and I think, when the Americans have looked
7 at it, I think there is an excellent, very long
8 description by the inspector general on the American
9 side looking back from February this year at the
10 failures in the reconstruction programme. I think the
11 Americans would also admit that there were indeed
12 shortcomings, major shortcomings.

13 As the Iraqi Government took control from the
14 beginning of 2005, the transitional government, and then
15 the government that came in in 2006, they were --
16 I think it is fair to say the Iraqis looked to
17 themselves as needing to deliver the services, though
18 recognised that they could not do so, given the security
19 conditions, without protection from the multinational
20 forces, but they were conscious, certainly talking to
21 the more, as it were, self-critical of the Iraqi
22 leadership -- they were very conscious of their own
23 shortcomings, their own inability to agree how to spend
24 their budget and to spend it indeed and to agree broad
25 economic policies.

1 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Now moving into our own contribution
2 in your period, we have heard in terms of criticism from
3 the immediate pre-war and post-war period coordination
4 with DFID and a lack of resource for our effort.

5 How did it seem to you, over your period, both when
6 you were working in London and in Baghdad, in terms of
7 the coordination of the British effort and the
8 sufficient resources to deliver it?

9 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: The DFID effort was focused on some
10 major infrastructure reconstruction in the south,
11 particularly electricity and water supplies, capacity
12 building in government, and there was a broader aid
13 effort on the security sector reform building up the
14 capability of the police service, and we were fairly
15 focused on those specific areas.

16 In terms of a contribution compared to other
17 coalition allies, leaving the Americans on one side, it
18 was clearly very significant and we were on the ground
19 in a way that other coalition allies were not. In
20 comparison with the American one, of course, it was
21 small, and it is sometimes difficult, as it were, to
22 disaggregate your reaction from our contribution,
23 financial contribution, and indeed human resource
24 contribution, in comparison to the Americans.

25 In terms of coordination, bearing in mind that we

1 were focusing on some of those specific areas: police,
2 prisons, judges, and some of the infrastructure in the
3 south, I don't think we fared any worse than others who
4 were engaged in the same exercises. It was a fiendishly
5 difficult context in which to operate, and extremely
6 frustrating. As soon as you built a water plant or put
7 up an electricity substation, it was frequently blown
8 up.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Were you content with the way that
10 the machinery was working in London? Did you think the
11 coordination itself was okay?

12 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: On the whole, yes. I mean, there was
13 a good process of coordination at official level,
14 regular, which was both strategic and operational, in
15 terms of fortnightly, regular meetings, every week on
16 that issue. I think in terms of being able to switch
17 funds, or find extra funds that were required at short
18 notice. It wasn't a particularly flexible or effective
19 system.

20 That came out rather visibly in 2006, when it was
21 clear that we needed to put greater effort into building
22 up the capabilities in Basra, which would have required
23 some quite significant extra funding. The calculation,
24 even then, was somewhere in the region of £13 million,
25 which, if my memory serves me right, was required to

1 come out of our current resources -- by "our", I mean
2 the Whitehall community's current resources -- which
3 struck me at the time as being certainly a peculiar way
4 of approaching what was -- the direction was that this
5 was a high priority, but we weren't being given the
6 resources, extra resources, to deliver it.

7 But in terms of coordination, yes, I think -- my
8 sense was there was transparency, there was clarity in
9 terms of what the objectives were, the priorities were,
10 and in coordination between us in Whitehall and those on
11 the ground in Baghdad and Basra in delivering it. The
12 failures, I think, were in very large part the result of
13 the conditions on the ground.

14 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: In terms of London, you have just
15 indicated a problem in getting extra resources at short
16 notice. Would you be involved in this in negotiations
17 with the Treasury? How would this sort of plea for
18 extra resources be handled?

19 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: It was -- it was just -- the plan was
20 agreed in terms of -- in the case of Basra, the specific
21 example of the Basra action plan, was agreed at
22 a Cabinet Office -- in the Cabinet Office context. It
23 was then left, as I say, to -- it was left to the
24 Whitehall departments to put the case to the Treasury
25 for resources to cover this, to which the answer came,

1 "There are no extra resources for this. You have to
2 find it of your own."

3 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: What about relations between the
4 Foreign Office and the other departments with a key
5 interest, in particular, in the Ministry of Defence,
6 again in London? Was there a sense of all departments
7 pulling together, that they had a similar sort of policy
8 or were there different agendas for different
9 ministries?

10 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: In terms of the practical cooperation
11 with the Ministry of Defence specifically, from my time
12 in London, the two years as Director of Iraq, it was
13 very close and very good. I used to go every week to
14 the meetings of the Chiefs and then the
15 Secretary of State for Defence came into that meeting.
16 There were rigorous exchanges.

17 As I say, they were round the table with the senior
18 officials and the strategy group to look at the horizon
19 scanning and at the operational level. I used to travel
20 regularly with my civilian Ministry of Defence
21 counterpart in talking to our coalition allies in the
22 south and we used to organise, every three months, the
23 Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, conferences
24 with those key allies.

25 In terms of understanding each other's agendas,

1 I felt it was transparent and very good. In terms of
2 whether the agendas meshed, there was -- it goes to the
3 very heart of the question of the transition and I'm
4 conscious I'm trespassing on Ministry of Defence
5 territory here, but from my perception, there was
6 a tension, an understandable tension, inside the
7 Ministry of Defence between the requirement for troops
8 to do other operations, a question in their minds over
9 the -- as it were, the troops to task, the
10 requirement -- the task that the troops were being asked
11 to carry out in Iraq and whether that was, as it were,
12 proportionate to the risk that they were undergoing, but
13 at the same time a very clear recognition that the
14 transition to Iraqi control had to be conducted in
15 conditions which would ensure that security was
16 sustainable once the transition was made, and a very
17 clear recognition that any sense that Britain was
18 cutting and running would have been deeply
19 counter-productive in the short and medium term to the
20 security conditions inside of Iraq.

21 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Did that view persist into your time
22 as ambassador?

23 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: I won't hide it. There was a long
24 debate in which even the Ministry of Defence didn't
25 sense that there was a single view on the timing and the

1 conditions -- the timing for the transition of
2 particularly Basra, or facilities that we had in
3 Basra City to the Iraqis and whether the conditions for
4 a sustainable, peaceful transition had been achieved or
5 not. Those were inevitably open to subjective judgment.

6 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: When you were in Baghdad, how did
7 the coordination feel there, perhaps particularly
8 between Baghdad and Basra, and between yourself and our
9 armed forces?

10 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: On the latter, I mean, between myself
11 and the armed forces, my chief counterpart in Baghdad
12 was the senior British military officer there, whom
13 I saw regularly and had a series of them over my time,
14 and with whom -- with all of whom I had a very good
15 relationship, though, as a sort of anecdote, it
16 underlines some of the practical problems, until my last
17 two months, it was impossible from my desk in the
18 embassy to talk to him on a secure line without the
19 intervention finally of the Americans. We had to use an
20 American system. But that's sort of anecdotal, but an
21 interesting concept of communications, secure
22 communications. So you had to do it face-to-face and
23 moving around even the Green Zone sometimes wasn't the
24 easiest.

25 But the relationship more broadly between my team at

1 the embassy and the military was very close and very
2 regular. With Basra, it was much more difficult. Not
3 merely was it difficult to get down there, we were
4 dependent upon, at that stage, helicopter trips out of
5 Baghdad to the airport and then to Basra, and the
6 military facilities weren't always ready for that. So
7 it was difficult to get down there.

8 It was difficult to move around Basra, but there was
9 another obstacle -- not an obstacle, another difficulty
10 of an easy, a neat sort of exchange of information,
11 which was that the senior British General in charge of
12 that area had, in a sense, two lines of reporting, one
13 to the multinational corps and the other one back here
14 to the PJHQ and that's where I sense sometimes that
15 a little bit of lack of clarity of what interests he
16 was -- what objectives he was having to promote.

17 But there was -- there is no hiding it, there was
18 a -- it was much more difficult to keep the coordination
19 close between the military operation down in Basra and
20 Baghdad.

21 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Coordination with the Americans,
22 which is obviously part of this particular piece, how
23 good was that?

24 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: Well, I had regular conversations with
25 my American counterpart and with the American military.

1 The sort of underlying question is: how effective was
2 the advice that we were given? To which my answer -- my
3 honest answer is, you know, funding and forces equals
4 influence. Our funding and forces in comparison to the
5 Americans was obviously very small in comparison to the
6 other coalition. The forces were much larger, but
7 I think there was an unrealistic expectation amongst our
8 political leaders of the degree to which the Americans
9 would absorb and act upon our advice. They would listen
10 to it. Whether they would act upon it was a different
11 question. They had a different approach from ours.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just finally before handing over to
13 Sir Roderic, I'm just wondering if a particularly
14 significant area of this perhaps was the whole question
15 of the surge? You mentioned the change in American
16 policy announced by President Bush at the start of 2007,
17 which was gradually implemented during the course of the
18 year, and you have also indicated the British
19 inclination was to get our forces out without being
20 given the appearance of cutting and running.

21 How did you manage that tension? How did you assess
22 the surge? Did you think this was sort of the last
23 throw of the dice, that might work but possibly
24 wouldn't, or did you think that, "Yes, the Americans
25 have got the resources to do that. Good luck to them,

1 but we can't"? How did you assess this and our
2 potential role within it?

3 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: I have to say that I had spent a lot of
4 time in the last few months of 2006, before the surge
5 was a real possibility as an option, talking through
6 with the Americans and our British officers, with the
7 multinational corps, that thinking behind this bridging
8 transition, this accelerated process of tuning up the
9 Iraqi forces and putting them in front and transitioning
10 control to them and withdrawing from a visible
11 front-line role, and it seemed -- I'm not a military
12 person, but it seemed to me to be coherent, provided it
13 was coupled with an effective delivery of services to
14 the areas that this was going to take place in.

15 I felt that that was a better way of reacting to
16 a strong desire on the part of the Iraqi leadership to
17 assume control. Again, personally, I was sceptical that
18 the surge would be effective and was unsure whether the
19 real objective of agreeing the local ceasefires with
20 some of the Sunni Arab areas' tribal leaders was
21 designed to minimise the casualties of US forces or was
22 really designed to -- or was designed to build them into
23 the political process, and my suspicions were that the
24 first objective, of trying to reduce American
25 casualties, completely understandable, was probably

1 a more important one in the minds of the military
2 planners, and I was sceptical that they would be
3 successful in persuading, particularly the Sunni Arab
4 tribal leaders, to be loyal to a Shia-led government in
5 Baghdad. So I was sceptical about the end objective,
6 whether it was achievable.

7 I think in retrospect I was wrong and I think the
8 surge did produce what General Petraeus was seeking to
9 achieve by it, not just to create the sort of breathing
10 space for some politics to work, but that it did, more
11 sustainably than I assumed, quieten those areas which
12 were extremely violent.

13 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But there was no advice that Britain
14 should be part of it? We were standing back to see what
15 would happen and continuing with our own policy of
16 handing over --

17 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: There was no question that we should be
18 part of the surge. What was important, once the
19 Americans had gone into the surge, was to ensure that
20 our timelines for transition in the south meshed in
21 their timelines of the surge, and that was more
22 difficult because the point where the surge was
23 beginning to take place was the point at which we were
24 intending to transition, and, indeed, transition some of
25 the facilities from Basra to the Iraqis, but it

1 didn't -- it did require some persuading of the
2 Americans, that the conditions in Basra were right for
3 the transition to take place.

4 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you very much.

5 THE CHAIRMAN: I have got just a couple of questions, one
6 particular and one general. Sir Lawrence was successful
7 in inviting you to look, after the event, at things that
8 happened before your arrival in 2004 on the scene.

9 I just wanted, from that retrospect, to ask you: we
10 have heard a lot of evidence and read a great deal that
11 a major precipitating factor in the breakdown of
12 security after the invasion was over was the decision to
13 de-Ba'athify on a comprehensive basis. We understand
14 that often it would be intolerable to the Shia
15 community, now coming into possession of their majority
16 status, to have anybody who had been part of what they
17 saw as, and was, a generally oppressive regime taking
18 power or authority or even responsibility.

19 On the other hand, is it true that, in effect, to be
20 a member of the professional classes, you would have had
21 to be a Ba'athist in the Saddam era, and, therefore,
22 a comprehensive de-Ba'athification decision amounted to
23 the exclusion from, removal from, effective contribution
24 to the post-invasion society of everybody with
25 professional and comparable qualifications?

1 If and to the extent that's true, was there a better
2 balance available between, on the one hand, the Shia
3 aversion to their former oppressors, but, on the other
4 hand, the need to retain at least a significant
5 contribution to post-invasion Iraq society.

6 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think Bremer recognised that by the
7 time he left, indeed was trying in the last couple of
8 months to revise the way that the de-Ba'athification
9 decision was implemented, and that was very much behind
10 our activity, in which I was involved personally, of
11 trying to persuade, in 2005 and 2006, the Iraqi and
12 particularly the Shia leadership to accept that they
13 would reduce significantly the number of ex-Ba'athis who
14 would be excluded from holding any office, to limit it,
15 as it were, to the very top echelons.

16 I think that also in part reflected even a Shia
17 recognition that they had no civil service anymore, no
18 teachers, no doctors. There was a whole corps, as you
19 say, of professionals, who were either excluded or, as
20 the insurgency or sectarian violence got worse, started
21 moving out from Baghdad and, indeed, from Iraq
22 altogether. So there was a recognition that they had no
23 underpinning sort of official bureaucracy.

24 THE CHAIRMAN: Just as a tail-piece, was the gradual
25 mitigation of that extreme initial de-Ba'athification

1 policy also a means of securing progressively more Sunni
2 buy-in to their different and reduced status?

3 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: It was certainly one of the many Sunni
4 requirements for opting into the political process, but
5 there were many more. That was one of them, but there
6 were some more fundamental ones, actually, which were to
7 do with the face, the nature, of Iraqi Government which
8 they still viewed as being essentially a coalition Shia.

9 So whether or not they were Ba'athis, they didn't
10 feel that they, Sunni Arabs, were being given proper
11 positions in government or in the security forces or
12 anywhere else, and even if they were, that their views,
13 once there, were not listened to.

14 THE CHAIRMAN: A more general question, which in a way is
15 connected, I suppose. You mentioned the problems of
16 acquiring competencies in economic and budgetary matters
17 by the interim and transitional governments. It's
18 experience in, certainly, other places, that in
19 a divided community, the most difficult area in which to
20 secure, as it were, acceptance, once security is
21 reasonably under control, is policing and justice.
22 Almost always problems with corruption, penetration by
23 outside elements, the feeling that police and justice
24 authorities represent one side of the divided community.
25 I just wonder how far in post-invasion Iraq that was the

1 position, given the relative separation of the different
2 communities, the Kurds in the north, the Sunni centre
3 and the Shia south?

4 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think I think it is focused --

5 I think one would focus on Baghdad, whose sectarian
6 make-up changed, I think probably quite significantly.
7 The figures are very unclear, but pretty significantly
8 over the three or four years that I was overseeing them
9 or was involved in Iraq.

10 So although you may have a largely Shia south and
11 Kurdish north and you could find perhaps Sunni Arabs to
12 police the Sunni Arab areas, it was more complex than
13 that when it came to Baghdad, but it was even more
14 complex than that inside their own communities, because
15 in the case of the Shia community, there was tremendous
16 tension between the constituent parts, to which you only
17 have to look at the four months it took on each occasion
18 for the Shia community, in effect, to agree
19 a Prime Minister.

20 But that was so more broadly in the community -- in
21 their communities, Basra a classic case in point of
22 rival militias and rival political interests effectively
23 fighting it out on the streets. So infiltration of one
24 part, one party or one militia into a police force
25 produced its own problems even within the Shia

1 community.

2 But in terms of Baghdad, it was exacerbated much
3 more, because then there was a distrust on the part of
4 one community or the other to have policing from members
5 of the others, particularly as it became -- particularly
6 after 2005 into 2006, when the Ministry of Interior at
7 that period -- or the Ministry of Interior had become
8 subject to heavy intrusion, infiltration of militias
9 into the police service.

10 THE CHAIRMAN: Just to conclude, is it reasonable we have to
11 look at lessons learned for the future, and no situation
12 completely resembles a predecessor, that nonetheless,
13 the need to pay particular attention in preparatory
14 planning to policing and justice given the problems that
15 had chronically afternoon in different societies at
16 different times should be a higher priority than it has
17 been, at least, in the Iraq case? I'm talking about
18 pre-planning now.

19 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: One of the major failures was the
20 inability to provide security across the scene. I mean,
21 not just military, but also policing. But pre-planning,
22 yes, and realism about the length of time it takes to
23 train. I mean, if -- when the police service
24 effectively collapsed in April 2004, when it was first
25 tested with the insurgency, my recollection was that the

1 assessment subsequently was that only 5,000 of the whole
2 police force were adequately trained. So no wonder they
3 disappeared from the police stations. So training --
4 quality rather than quantity is one of the lessons.

5 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Sir Roderic?

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: I would just like to take a look at the
7 change with the appearance of Nouri Al-Maliki as
8 Prime Minister, nominated on 22 April 2006. I believe
9 that you met him soon after that, while you were on
10 a visit to Iraq, and then, four months later, you
11 arrived there as an Ambassador.

12 What were Prime Minister Maliki's priorities when he
13 took up office and how did his relationship with the
14 United Kingdom, the British Government, yourself,
15 develop?

16 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: His priorities, as he described them to
17 me, both, as you say, when I saw him on a visit and then
18 as Ambassador -- his priorities were declared to be
19 reconciliation and it was right to give him the benefit
20 of the doubt, that that was indeed one of his key
21 objectives. I think there is a question mark over what
22 reconciliation means to Iraqis. That's a longer, more
23 complex debate.

24 One of his other priorities, and he used to say this
25 often, was that he wanted to be in charge of deploying

1 Iraqi security forces around Iraq and in determining the
2 operations that they should be engaged upon. So there
3 was a strong instinct on his part to take on -- assume
4 the role of a sovereign Prime Minister.

5 He had another major concern, though, which was,
6 I guess, borne out of his appointment as
7 Prime Minister -- it took so long -- was that it was --
8 he felt that he did not command the loyalty even of
9 those within his own Shia Alliance, or indeed of other
10 communities, the Kurdish or the Sunni Arab. So I think
11 it is fair to say that he was always concerned about the
12 risk that other political leaders were about to
13 undermine him.

14 SIR RODERIC LYNE: His relationship with the British?

15 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: It was varied. At some points, it was
16 very suspicious, at some points it was very warm. He
17 greatly enjoyed and respected the company of our
18 Prime Minister and the Ministers. He also very much
19 wanted Britain to get much more engaged in Iraq,
20 specifically on commercial and trade matters.

21 But Basra -- there were two things that sometimes
22 got in the way of an easy relationship. One was his
23 suspicion that we collectively were too closely aligned
24 with Ayad Allawi and that used to come through in some
25 rather extraordinary ways directly to me, when there was

1 a conference, supposedly a conference, held in London
2 soon after I arrived in the summer of 2006, of what was
3 described as Iraqi opposition, at which Ayad Allawi was
4 allegedly featuring, but we could never find that such
5 a conference took place. Certainly we had no role in
6 it.

7 Then soon after that, the EU presidency, the Germans
8 at the time, invited Ayad Allawi in Baghdad to come and
9 address the UN ambassadors and I told them that that was
10 not a sensible idea in the current context of suspicion,
11 so it didn't happen, but nevertheless, for some reason
12 I still cannot fathom, we were fingered, Britain and
13 I -- indeed, I personally was fingered as being
14 responsible somehow for even trying to organise such
15 a meeting.

16 So there was a sort of underlying suspicion of,
17 I guess, our commitment to him, which I spent a lot of
18 time reassuring him that they were completely and
19 utterly committed to him as a Prime Minister, and so did
20 our Prime Minister do the same.

21 The second piece of dust in the works was Basra.
22 I think in part it because he had around him --
23 Prime Minister Maliki had around him a number of people
24 whose agenda may have been to poison his mind about what
25 we were engaged on in Basra, but he did react extremely

1 strongly to those occasions, one in particular, where he
2 felt that the British forces in Basra had overstepped
3 the line in terms of intruding into the sovereignty of
4 Iraq where usually there was, in the case of arrests of
5 people who were in the Iraqi security forces or were
6 communing with the Iraqi security forces and were
7 criminal, and we needed to get them off the streets, but
8 he reacted very, very strongly to that, and I -- looking
9 back at the exchanges I had with him, many exchanges
10 I had with him on Basra, I am left with a sense that he
11 was, as it were, split two ways; one wanting the British
12 to hand over in Basra at an early -- as early a stage as
13 possible, but at the same time being very conscious that
14 he, as a Shia Prime Minister, could not afford to
15 take -- to assume control of Basra if it were then just
16 to devolve into civil conflict. So he wanted to make
17 sure that the transition was done in a way that there
18 was a sustainable peace there.

19 The two tended to, I think, work against each other
20 in his mind, but I sense that the stronger was to take
21 control, Iraqi control of Basra, as soon as possible,
22 and he felt that we were dragging our feet.

23 SIR RODERIC LYNE: In terms of this increasing violence in
24 Basra, did you feel that the British forces and the
25 coalition, and indeed the British Government in

1 Whitehall, were reacting quickly enough to the
2 increasing violence, the security problem there?

3 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think I would say that it was -- that
4 the reaction in Basra was always going to be -- the
5 decisions needed to be taken on the ground, that the
6 development of military operations, security operations,
7 against the security targets and the development of
8 a reconstruction programme, both, as it were -- the
9 framework for each were -- by then, by the time I was
10 ambassador in Baghdad, the framework was pretty
11 well-known, what was required.

12 There were, of course, some occasions where the
13 military commander, the British military commander would
14 have needed to go back to his military bosses to, as it
15 were, get top cover for his operational plan, and in
16 a characteristic military way that was done very
17 quickly. But in terms of seeking reaction or guidance
18 from London, I think it was pretty clear what the
19 objectives were. Our task was to try and implement
20 them.

21 SIR RODERIC LYNE: You have described the difficulty for you
22 of getting frequently from Baghdad to Basra, and as you
23 have just said, the decisions needed to be taken by
24 people on the ground there.

25 To what extent was there effectively a division of

1 labour, and we had one group of people, civilian and
2 military, in Baghdad, another group, a large group, in
3 the southern region of Iraq and they were run as
4 separate entities rather than under a single control?

5 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think it is -- in large part, that's
6 a fair description. The point at which -- and one had
7 to presume competence on the part of the operation down
8 in Basra to deliver the objectives which we were all
9 signed up to. The one point where the integration had
10 to be close and wasn't always achieved was to ensure
11 that particularly security operations down in Basra did
12 not fall foul of political considerations up in Baghdad,
13 and this was not just a problem between Basra and
14 Baghdad, it was a problem on some occasions between the
15 coalition military structures and the Iraqi political
16 structures, where there was an assumption on the
17 coalition military that such an operation was necessary
18 for security reasons, when -- without necessarily
19 clearing permission for that operation to take place
20 from the Iraqi political leadership. That's when the
21 backlash from the Iraqi political leadership was most
22 felt.

23 So it was trying to foresee the political
24 consequences of some of the security operations that
25 I found my main role in Baghdad, as regards Basra, was.

1 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So there was a tension effectively
2 between trying to maximise our military effectiveness in
3 the region and the need to make sure that we had the
4 right level of consent from the capital?

5 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: We were -- yes. We were exploring
6 where the boundaries lay all the time between operations
7 down in Basra, against an objective, which was agreed by
8 the Iraqi Government of developing it, and clearing out
9 the criminal elements from the security forces. But
10 there were sensitivities that sometimes we were ignorant
11 of when we trod on them.

12 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Was there also a tension in the British
13 Government between those who argued that the priority
14 should be on getting things right in Baghdad and from
15 the centre and those who were saying that our prime role
16 was to make a success of the southern region, where we
17 had the lead responsibility within the coalition?

18 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: I didn't feel that personally. I felt
19 both were important but both, as it were -- it wasn't an
20 either/or.

21 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Did we at any point come close to
22 achieving the objective that had been set very early on,
23 perhaps even before the conflict, of doing an exemplary
24 job in the southern region of Iraq?

25 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: Sorry, could you just ...?

1 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Before the conflict began, the idea came
2 up within Whitehall that if we were given, as we were
3 clearly going to be given, the responsibility for both
4 the military and the civilian aspects for the southern
5 region of Iraq after the conflict, that we, the British,
6 should do an "exemplary" job there. The word
7 "exemplary" acquired a certain significance at the time
8 in Whitehall, and we have discussed with the previous
9 witnesses the question of whether the means were willed
10 to achieve that end.

11 Did we in practice ever come close to it or did we
12 really fall well below the benchmark that at one stage
13 had been set for ourselves?

14 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: The concept of doing an exemplary job
15 in Basra I don't think was one that by the time I came
16 on to the scene, I was conscious of or working to, and
17 the reality was, as the reality became clear in the rest
18 of Iraq, that you were dealing with what was almost
19 always going to be a manageable level of violence and
20 creating the conditions for handing over a sustainable
21 set of conditions, in the case of Basra, to the
22 Iraqi Government; in other words, circumstances in which
23 Iraqi political and security authorities could manage
24 the area and develop it.

25 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Finally, can I ask you a much broader

1 question? You have had a very long period of service in
2 the Middle East and working with the region before,
3 during and after your time dealing with Iraq. From that
4 perspective, what would be your assessment of the
5 overall effect that British participation in the action
6 in Iraq has had on the United Kingdom's standing, its
7 reputation in the Middle East and indeed in the Islamic
8 world?

9 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: I think it is less now than -- I think
10 it is diminishing, the effect. I am struck, with the
11 two years I have been in Cairo --

12 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Diminishing?

13 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: Diminishing in the sense of the
14 negative reaction.

15 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Negative. I didn't ascribe negative or
16 positive, so perhaps you would like to start with the
17 bottom line.

18 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: There was a sense that the coalition
19 action in Iraq had opened the door to Iran into the
20 region, that however -- this is broadly from the Arab
21 government, that however much they may have disliked the
22 Ba'athist regime and Saddam individually, it was in
23 effect for the Arab region the bulwark against the
24 intrusion of Iranian influences and that the lack of
25 political control in Iraq after the invasion gave the

1 Iranians all sorts of opportunities to insert themselves
2 in a way hitherto not into regional politics, and
3 I still hear that argument from Arabs, that 2003 did
4 break that bulwark against Iranian intrusion. I'm
5 talking about perceptions.

6 The reaction in the Arab world -- I can't speak
7 about the Muslim world outside the Arab world, Indonesia
8 and Malaysia, but particularly in the Arab world -- to
9 the first two or three years after 2003 was very hostile
10 because of the perceived occupation of Iraq by
11 multinational forces and the casualties suffered by
12 Iraqis.

13 As the Iraqi Government has assumed a greater
14 control over affairs inside Iraq, the reaction,
15 certainly as seen from the last two years sitting in
16 Cairo, has been, to my surprise, much less focused on
17 the negative effects of our involvement in Iraq. They
18 still think there is a long way to go but it is, in
19 political terms, a risk and that the risk of collapse of
20 order in Iraq is still there, which would have profound
21 effects in their view on their own Arab countries and
22 their own internal politics.

23 The obverse is they are engaging with the current
24 government in Baghdad and are looking in some cases --
25 in the case of the Egyptians, for example, they have

1 sent an ambassador there -- are looking for
2 opportunities to help rebuild the Iraqi economy and
3 Iraqi society. So my sense is they are looking at the
4 future and looking to rebuild Iraq and that the high
5 levels of hostility towards the coalition involvement in
6 Iraq has diminished.

7 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But there is still perhaps a risk that
8 some lasting damage has been done both to the region and
9 to Britain's reputation in the region as a result of
10 doing what at the time the British Government felt was
11 the right thing to do?

12 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: To be perfectly honest, I thought at
13 the time it would be. I'm not sure, with my experience
14 of the last two years, I still hold that view. I think
15 the reputation of Britain is more focused still on
16 Palestine than on what we did in Iraq.

17 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you.

18 THE CHAIRMAN: Usha?

19 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Can I just take you back to 2004
20 because you said that the interim government wasn't
21 prepared for the role. What were the reasons for that?

22 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: The Coalition Provisional Authority
23 effectively ran all the ministries. There was no civil
24 service, there was no effective security force and there
25 was profound distrust between the political parties, the

1 political leadership, and the ministries it inherited
2 had been run, effectively, as sectarian fiefdoms. It
3 was very clear in some ministries.

4 So what they were inheriting -- it was pitiable, the
5 Prime Minister had effectively no supporting
6 secretariat. It was one of the areas that we were very
7 closely involved in, in actually creating his office,
8 creating a Cabinet Office secretariat that would service
9 him, and it was run out of a couple of rooms. So,
10 physically and in terms of human resource, the
11 capability was not there.

12 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Would you say that it is something
13 that the CPA or we or the United States would have done
14 something about?

15 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: Should have?

16 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Hm-mm.

17 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: Yes. Honestly, I would have said yes.

18 But can I just --

19 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Yes.

20 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: But, given the context, that there was
21 not at that stage any Iraqi civil service substructure
22 to call on, it is very difficult to see how one could
23 have done it, because what wouldn't necessarily have
24 worked -- I don't think what would have worked, although
25 in effect we had to rely to a large extent on it, was

1 the drafting in of a large number of foreign advisers to
2 perform the functions.

3 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Can I briefly bring you back to
4 2007? In response to Sir Lawrence, you said that the
5 surge in -- and the validity of the objective and that
6 you were wrong. How did the United States sort of react
7 to our failure to surge?

8 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: It didn't ask us to surge. It was very
9 much an American affair and it was both a security surge
10 and an economic surge, and to put it again into context,
11 it was all hands on deck as far as the Americans were
12 concerned.

13 The only way it affected us -- but that was hardly
14 a great effect. The only way it affected us was,
15 because they were throwing everything at it and had to
16 deliver -- again, don't forget they had to deliver
17 by September 2007 assurances to Congress on a whole
18 series of benchmarks that Congress had set, some to do
19 with passing legislation, some to do with security.
20 They were throwing everything at being able to make the
21 argument to Congress that those benchmarks had been
22 sufficiently met for the surge to continue.

23 But it was very much an American affair. They could
24 not quite understand why we didn't have all hands on
25 deck too, but that was just because it goes to sort of

1 an underlying difference all the way through, I think,
2 between us -- not all the way through, for the last
3 three or four years, where the Americans had been
4 effectively on a war footing with Iraq in a way that
5 I don't sense that we have been.

6 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Martin?

8 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: May I ask you briefly about the Kurds?

9 Sir Peter Ricketts told us last week about the
10 discussions in London in the summer of 2002 about the
11 end state, what we hoped would emerge after the fall of
12 Saddam, and this very much stressed the unity of Iraq,
13 that it wouldn't be fragmented and broken up and also,
14 of course, our northern Fly Zone policy was very much
15 geared towards helping the Kurds.

16 I wondered from your time as ambassador: what was
17 our relationship with the Kurds and how far are we, as
18 Britain, able to engage with the Kurds and maintain the
19 Kurdish element within the sort of Iraqi politic?

20 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: President Talabani was, as it were,
21 from one part of the Kurdish community, was in many ways
22 looked on as the father of Iraq. It went with his whole
23 demeanour and the way he comported himself. His
24 counterpart, from the KDP side, Massoud Barzani,
25 remained up in the north, and I often felt that the

1 longer he stayed up there, the more disconnected he used
2 to get from the rest of Iraq. He used occasionally to
3 come down to Baghdad, when there was serious political
4 work to do, which was an important signal that he
5 recognised that the Kurdish region had to be still part
6 of the whole polity, but I think by instinct and
7 background he was not fully brought into that,
8 enthusiastically brought into that idea.

9 At the same time all Kurds are very realistic,
10 although they have a very, very strong, as you know,
11 nationalist Kurdish instinct -- were realistic that they
12 cannot exist in the foreseeable future except as part of
13 Iraq. So they have had to be part of the system. That
14 wouldn't stop them expanding the boundaries of what was
15 permissible in terms of autonomy or as separate
16 structures in the Kurdish region, specifically when it
17 came to oil and to security forces. But at heart
18 I think their objective, even Barzani's objective, was
19 to preserve as much autonomy as they had achieved under
20 Saddam but to recognise that they were essentially and
21 potentially a decisive third force in Iraqi politics.

22 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Are there any final comments you
23 would like to make that we haven't been able to cover
24 this afternoon?

25 MR DOMINIC ASQUITH: No.

1 THE CHAIRMAN: In that case I will close this session, with
2 our thanks to our witness and to all of those who have
3 been here this afternoon.

4 Just to remind you regarding next week, we resume at
5 11.30 on Monday morning. That will take us back into
6 the time sequence. We will be looking at events in
7 Baghdad, before Mr Asquith arrived, in 2004/2005. Then
8 we shall see a number of diplomatic and military
9 witnesses during the week about the invasion itself and
10 what happened afterwards.

11 So, with that and our thanks indeed to the Queen
12 Elizabeth Conference Centre for supporting this through
13 the last two weeks, I will close this week's work and
14 say thank you all very much.

15 (3.37 pm)

16 (The Inquiry adjourned until 11.30 am on Monday,
17 7 December 2009)

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