

Monday, 25 January 2010

1

2 (2.00 pm)

3

RT HON DES BROWNE MP

4 THE CHAIRMAN: Good afternoon.

5 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Good afternoon.

6 THE CHAIRMAN: Good afternoon and welcome everyone. This

7 afternoon, we are taking evidence from the

8 Rt Hon Des Browne MP. You were Secretary of State for

9 Defence from May 2006 until October 2008, I think.

10 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I was, yes.

11 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We are going to ask questions

12 about policy decisions taken during your time in office

13 and about the implementation of those decisions in Iraq.

14 Mr Browne was Defence Secretary during a period when

15 the security situation was very severe in 2006 to 2007,

16 and we will be asking about the United Kingdom

17 government's response to this. We shall also be asking

18 questions about the subsequent move in the autumn of

19 2007 of the UK military from Basra City to consolidate

20 at Basra airbase and about the policy of overwatch that

21 was then adopted.

22 Now, I expect we will take a break at about

23 3 o'clock and to go on until about 4 o'clock in this

24 session.

25 We recognise, and I say this on each occasion, that

1 witnesses are giving evidence based in part on their
2 recollection of events. We, of course, cross-check what
3 we hear against the papers to which we have access, some
4 of which are still coming in.

5 I remind every witness that he will later be asked
6 to sign a transcript of his evidence to the effect that
7 the evidence given is truthful, fair and accurate.

8 With that, I'll ask Sir Lawrence Freedman to pick up
9 the questions. Sir Lawrence?

10 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you.

11 Mr Browne, when you became Secretary of State
12 for Defence in May 2006, what was the Prime Minister's
13 advice, instructions, whatever, to you? What did he say
14 to you about Iraq that he thought needed doing most?

15 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, you first of all have --

16 I think should remember that my early days were
17 dominated by an event in Basra. I was the Secretary of
18 State, I think, for just over 24 hours. It was a Friday
19 into a Saturday, and the Lynx helicopter was shot down
20 in Basra and we lost five personnel.

21 So that was an early introduction for me and
22 a salutary introduction into the risks that our troops
23 were running and the consequences of that for families
24 and others, and the nature of it -- I mean, I drew a lot
25 of conclusions, early conclusions, from that experience

1 that I had, but the overall strategic approach to Iraq,
2 when I was appointed as Secretary of State, was quite
3 fixed. We were, at that stage -- and the Prime Minister
4 explained this to me -- in a process of conditional
5 transfer of responsibility for security to the Iraqi
6 authorities.

7 The Prime Minister explained to me what that meant,
8 the conditionality that was associated with it -- and we
9 may go into that in some detail at some stage later --
10 and it was very clear to me, and, as I came to know and
11 understand the detail of the job, that it would be my
12 responsibility in the wider strategy to deliver the
13 military part of that.

14 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: You rightly remind us of the
15 dreadful events with which you started, and in general,
16 during your time in Iraq, casualties were very severe.
17 This was some of the worst times in terms of losses.

18 Did you find that conditioned your approach or did
19 you in some senses have to sort of steel yourself in
20 terms of pushing on with the strategic objectives,
21 knowing full well that there would be more deaths and
22 injuries of the sort that you had experienced right from
23 the start?

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I think I would say that, in that
25 sense, I had the benefit of a very realistic appraisal

1 of the environment that we were operating in and what
2 the likely progression of that would be, in terms of
3 violence, by those who advised me and who had a very
4 clear understanding, and it proved to be correct.

5 I point out that early on in my term of office in
6 late May, I made a speech, I think, at RUSI and
7 I subsequently made a speech at Chatham House -- these
8 are in the public domain -- in which I spelt out the
9 strategy, and part of that was to explain publicly, in
10 terms of our communication of the strategy, that we
11 anticipated that, as we withdrew our troops from Basra,
12 then the militia and others who were there would seek to
13 take credit for that and they would do that by
14 increasing the level of attacks on our troops.

15 You have also got to bear in mind that this was in
16 the aftermath of the Al Askari shrine event, and Shia
17 violence and militia violence was increasing in any
18 event, and it peaked at quite a significant peak not
19 that long after I became the Secretary of State.

20 So -- but interestingly -- and my recollection of
21 this, and my reading in anticipation of this evidence
22 reminded me that my recollection is correct -- over the
23 30 months that I was the Secretary of State, we stuck to
24 that strategy. It did not divert us from the strategy.
25 You asked me the effect -- I think it is well-known,

1 because I made no secret of it, that I found it
2 difficult to come to terms with the death of our people
3 in the operational environment. I had no military
4 experience. I hadn't the benefit of military
5 experience, which helps people to cope, I think, at the
6 strategic level, and I found it difficult to personally
7 to deal with the losses of our people in the operational
8 theatre, and I became focused, I think rightly, on our
9 people and their families and on our support for them
10 during the time that I had this awesome responsibility.

11 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think we may want to ask you some
12 more questions on that particular aspect. Amongst
13 your colleagues in government, what did you sense was
14 the view of Iraq now? Was this something that had
15 become a bit of an embarrassment for which they would
16 like to get out of as quickly as possible, or was there
17 still a sort of feeling that, whatever had been done in
18 the past, somehow this had to be brought through to as
19 good a conclusion as possible?

20 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I think more the latter. I mean,
21 I think by the time I became the Secretary of State
22 for Defence, I think I can say with some confidence
23 that, by and large, people's positions about our
24 intervention in Iraq, about the war in Iraq, were fixed
25 and I had no sense, over the time that I was Secretary

1 of State for Defence, that I ever changed anybody's mind
2 about the rightness or wrongness of it, about the
3 legality or otherwise of it. My sense was that we had
4 a responsibility.

5 I had a particular responsibility, which I took on
6 voluntarily, in terms of being the Secretary of State
7 for Defence, and we were in Iraq in all of the time that
8 I was there, I think I can say -- in all of the time
9 that I was there in the context of the United Nations
10 Security Council Resolution. So we were delivering --
11 I was responsible for delivering, but in the wider
12 context, I accepted shared responsibility for that; the
13 development of this country and its governance and its
14 ability to look after its own security, and latterly
15 I became involved in a whole list of other things,
16 including economic development and (inaudible) and so
17 did the troops that we deployed. But all in the context
18 of the United Nations Security Council Resolution.

19 So positions were fixed. There was no great
20 discussion in government of the nature that you
21 described. It was: we had this responsibility and we
22 had to deliver on it, and I was clear what I had to do.

23 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: When the Prime Minister asked you to
24 take up your position, he also asked you to take
25 responsibility for co-ordinating all UK efforts in Iraq?

1 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: He did, yes, and I accepted that, and
2 indeed there is a -- there was a document -- I mean,
3 I wrote back to him accepting this responsibility and
4 describing how I would seek to try and deliver that.

5 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I'll just come back in a second to
6 what you said in that document. Who had been doing this
7 before?

8 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't know the answer to that
9 question, to be honest.

10 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Were you surprised that it was the
11 Defence Secretary, rather than, say, the Foreign
12 Secretary who had been given this job?

13 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: When I came into the job, I had no
14 previous detailed experience of that area of government,
15 in which to make that sort of judgment. I mean, clearly
16 our military operations sat in the context of a wider
17 strategic objective, which was owned by all of
18 government, and I mean, I know what other people have
19 said when they were in office, where they felt the
20 overarching strategic responsibility lay in government,
21 but I was content to accept it, bear in mind, I think
22 when I became the Secretary of State, we had in
23 access -- would it have been 7,000 troops in Iraq? We
24 had by far the greatest number of people there and we
25 were spending a significant amount of resource there.

1 So it didn't strike me that, since I had a great
2 number of very senior people on the ground, that being
3 asked to co-ordinate this across government was --

4 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Perhaps you could just tell us how
5 you went about this. How did you co-ordinate? How did
6 you report back to the Prime Minister? What were your
7 main objectives?

8 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I mean, the paperwork which you
9 have seen, if you have seen all that I have seen, shows
10 that -- apart from anything else, I mean, I was in Iraq
11 nine times over the course of the time that I had
12 responsibility for, as Secretary of State for Defence,
13 and the reports of those visits to Iraq were
14 comprehensive, in my view, in the sense that they
15 covered, not just the military aspect, but -- I mean,
16 I met the leaders of every part of Iraqi politics.
17 I was in contact with every department of their
18 government that had shared responsibility with us for
19 delivering, and I met regularly those who represented
20 the coalition.

21 I mean, MND (South East) was truly multinational
22 when I came the Secretary of State for Defence. I think
23 there were 12 countries in total there at one stage.
24 There were eight by mid-2006. There was an established
25 process of weekly ministerial operational meetings.

1 They didn't take place every single week, but they took
2 place most weeks and they are noted, there is
3 a significant amount of paperwork for them. The other
4 departments who shared the responsibility, FCO and DFID,
5 attended those meetings and I regularly reported to the
6 Cabinet, and then, of course, there was the structure
7 and government of officials. There was a strategic
8 group of officials who reported through the structure
9 that I have indicated. All of this, of course, to what
10 was DOP(I) and later became NSID.

11 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: DOP(I), I think, met
12 in October 2006. Did that establish a sort of goal for
13 Iraq?

14 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The strategic approach, as far as we
15 were concerned, never really altered. It was fixed. We
16 were in a position of transition and the transition
17 involved provincial Iraqi control of the provinces that
18 we had responsibility for.

19 The process was established. In fact, the process
20 was proved comparatively shortly after I became the
21 Secretary of State for Defence, in that Al Muthanna was
22 transitioned to provincial Iraqi control, as
23 I recollect, in July. I think Dhi Qar was two months
24 later in September, Maysan in April 2007.

25 So by the time DOP(I) met, we had already proved

1 this process with two. But Basra was, of course, the
2 key and Basra was a different kettle of fish from the
3 others. Of course, it could be said also that Maysan
4 was, Maysan was a very particular province, sitting, as
5 it did, on a border, most of which was underwater and
6 which the people that lived in that border had not, for
7 centuries, paid very much attention to.

8 So it was a particular province, but it didn't have
9 the same challenges as Basra did. So by the time DOP(I)
10 met in October, we had already proved that process.

11 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: As you say, when you start moving on
12 to Basra, you have got a much more substantial problem
13 on your hands and there is a question, I think, around
14 all of this as to whether -- how much of a desirable
15 end-state you could actually achieve before you left or
16 would it be necessary for British forces to leave when
17 not everything was as we would wish.

18 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't think anybody who ever
19 advised me -- and I became like this too -- was anything
20 other than completely and utterly realistic about that.

21 All of this strategy operated in the context of
22 a very difficult situation in Iraq, where there was
23 a diversity of security challenge across the country,
24 and for reasons to do with the state of the alliance
25 between the Sunni militia and Al-Qaeda, around about

1 Baghdad and in Baghdad and in the west of the country in
2 particular, and because of the nature of the violence,
3 which I'm quite prepared to discuss with you in some
4 detail, between the Shia in the south and the -- the
5 circumstances that I inherited -- there was an increase
6 in this violence.

7 But we were very clear that this Shia violence in
8 the south-east -- and I have explained this on many
9 occasions and indeed in both of these speeches that
10 I have already referred to very early on -- was
11 a competition for influence and resources in the south,
12 and it was influenced by Iran, but we were very clear
13 that it would be a combination of Iraqi politics and
14 Iraqi security that would deal with that, that there was
15 no way that the coalition forces could deal with that in
16 a sustainable fashion. There had to be an Iraqi
17 solution.

18 Now, if you further complicate that by the fact that
19 the Iraqi Prime Minister, I think, had been appointed by
20 a matter of days when I was appointed the Secretary of
21 State for Defence after a significant period of time,
22 following the election, he was in the process of
23 building his government and his government was an
24 alliance, it was a coalition, and, frankly, that
25 coalition included the Sadrists, and the JAM militias,

1 who were a significant malign force at least at one
2 level in Basra, were part of the general political area
3 of the Sadrists, they were a manifestation of the
4 Sadrism movement. Moqtadr Al Sadr, who was their
5 leader, was, on occasions, in and out of the country,
6 but all of this development of this process complicated
7 the environment in which we lived, but we were very
8 clear there had to be the building up of the Iraqi
9 forces and the maturity of the Iraqi politics that would
10 deal with that sustainably, and, actually, that proved
11 to be the case later on, but we will come to that.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you, but let's just be clear,
13 the situation in Basra, as you became the Secretary for
14 Defence -- I mean, we heard from General Shirreff, when
15 he was here, that, when he arrived in July, we could
16 only put 200 soldiers on the streets of Basra City of
17 1.3 -- we have had estimates of anything up to 3 million
18 people. Nobody seems to know. There was a cycle of
19 insecurity. The militia effectively controlled the
20 city. So that our position was extremely tenuous in the
21 summer of 2006 in Basra.

22 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I mean, our position -- I'm -- I'm
23 not in a position to recollect precisely those figures,
24 but I don't question those figures, because I'm not in
25 a position to do so, but we were, at that stage -- and

1 I repeat -- planning to, in fact, remove our troops
2 progressively, and we did, from Basra. That was because
3 there was an appreciation -- and I repeat this
4 appreciation, because it was conditioned into me by
5 people who knew and understood this and I was persuaded
6 by it.

7 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: What sort of people are we talking
8 about?

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Those who advised me. I mean I was
10 given comprehensive briefings.

11 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: This is officials and so on?

12 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Not just by officials, but by a whole
13 series of GOCs, including General Shirreff, I have to
14 say, in Basra itself on my regular visits.

15 The people on the ground, their analysis of it was
16 that this was a Shia competition. It was self-limiting
17 violence. There was an influence of the Iranians and it
18 was the engagement of the Iraqi politics -- and I spent
19 a lot of the time drawing the attention of the growing
20 Iraqi Government to the nature of the issue in Basra and
21 the importance of their contribution to resolving it.

22 It was at the point at which the Prime Minister felt
23 that his political position was secure enough and his
24 military effort would be good enough to deal with it.

25 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: That was some way ahead.

1 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: But that was the point that we were
2 trying to get them to, and progressively, and you have
3 to understand we were making a significant contribution
4 to that in training the 10th Division and then
5 subsequently the 14th Division of the Iraqi army, but
6 that was a progression of circumstances.

7 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: The 10th Division were problematic
8 in all of this.

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, the 10th Division were
10 problematic to an extent, but the 10th Division were
11 also a significant success. The 10th Division --

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But not in Basra.

13 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: -- deployed in part to Baghdad to
14 support the American surge and they got a catalogue of
15 positive critiques from very senior battle-hardened
16 American generals who worked with them.

17 So there was a problem that we identified, and
18 I don't think this is -- there is any secret about this.
19 There was a problem that we identified in the
20 10th Division about where they were recruited from and
21 the ability of the militia to be able to intimidate
22 their families.

23 That was why, not that long before the Charge of the
24 Knights, we agreed that the 10th Division should look
25 after the provinces other than the province of Basra,

1 and the 14th Division came down into Basra, but that was
2 a progression of the overall stage as we learned and
3 understood what was happening on the ground and the
4 effect of the militia on those soldiers that we were
5 training.

6 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But the basic problem was that, in
7 order to be able to leave Basra, we needed a degree of
8 security in Basra that we ourselves were unable to
9 provide. It could only, in the end, be provided by the
10 Iraqis, by this stage.

11 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The additional problem, of course,
12 was -- and we predicted this and there is a specific
13 paragraph that I'm prepared to draw your attention to in
14 my speech of 2006 spelling this out. We knew that, as
15 soon as we said we are planning to leave, the militia
16 would increase the attacks upon us, and, indeed, about
17 90 per cent of the attacks at one stage -- I may be
18 slightly exaggerating that, it may have been only
19 80 per cent, but a very substantial proportion of the
20 attacks that were taking place in Basra were on us.

21 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Because they wanted the kudos for
22 chasing the British out?

23 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: They knew what we were planning to do
24 strategically, but, in the kind of open democracy that
25 we live in, there is no alternative but for people like

1 me to answer questions in Parliament and other places
2 and to the media explaining what we are seeking to do.
3 We have to communicate our strategy to those people whom
4 we are accountable to here, and, once we put our
5 strategy, then the enemy will respond to that, and
6 I spelt this out. I said that we can expect that this
7 will happen and that's exactly what did happen.

8 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But the position as we were in, in
9 the middle of 2006, when Maliki has only just taken
10 over, you are having to hope quite a bit that Maliki is
11 going to take on this problem of the militias.

12 Did he give you a commitment early on that he was
13 prepared to do so?

14 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The Prime Minister regularly gave me
15 undertakings that he would instruct that resources, both
16 military and other resources, would be devoted to Basra.

17 However, his machinery of government was not always
18 capable of delivering that, and he had the additional
19 problem, of course, that the Provincial Council in Basra
20 at the time, which again was an elected body, was -- did
21 not function properly on occasions.

22 My perception, the then governor was a malign
23 influence who was associated with the complexity of the
24 local politics which was tied up with the militia.

25 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So the basic problem through 2006

1 is, though you can see the way forward and you have
2 indicated that things did turn out not too badly in that
3 regard, as they were then, there was very little upon
4 which you could base any optimism, given the
5 configuration of political forces and the role of the
6 militias?

7 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: You are questioning me about Basra,
8 but we still had responsibility for a rather large part
9 of Iraq, and we were delivering, you know, on the
10 strategy, the process was working in Muthanna, Dhi Qar,
11 Maysan, to the extent, in fact, that our overwatch of
12 Maysan subsequently was very successful at the point at
13 which the militia in Al-Amarah attacked the authorities
14 there, and we stood by effectively and overwatched while
15 the local politics sorted that out. So the process was
16 proved to work in the overall environment. There were
17 particular challenges in Basra and we had to work our
18 way through them.

19 Now, we responded to them with the resources that we
20 had, you know, as best we could, and I spent a lot of
21 time in Iraq, and in government here, ensuring that --
22 or trying to ensure that the relevant supportive
23 resources, both from the Iraqis or from our coalition
24 partners, were made available to us to be able to get
25 through the time that we needed to allow for the

1 development of the forces who would eventually be able
2 to deal with it and to allow for the maturing of the
3 political structures in Iraq which would eventually deal
4 with it as well by negotiation.

5 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Were you advised that more British
6 military resources/troops were going to be needed to
7 bring the situation to a satisfactory one?

8 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't recollect at any stage --
9 I do remember one occasion, and I think you have heard
10 evidence about this, that we deployed the reserve, but
11 we would periodically deploy the reserve in the context
12 of the RIB in any event, in the context of the change,
13 but we deployed the reserve, I think, at one stage, if
14 I remember correctly, in the context of
15 Operation Zenith, which was the operation which
16 stretched throughout almost all of 2007 about this
17 transition for Basra, but I don't remember at any time
18 being asked to find extra troops or -- I don't remember
19 being asked to find extra troops.

20 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So you were essentially content to
21 work within the framework that you had of the number of
22 troops there and all the effort was really into getting
23 the Iraqis to step up so that they could take
24 responsibility for the security situation?

25 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I mean, I'm reluctant to concede to

1 a leading question that uses the word "content". This
2 was a difficult environment to work in. It was
3 a difficult environment to work in, but I, in a sense,
4 kept my eye on the ball all the time. I knew what was
5 needed to come together to have any prospect of
6 a sustainable resolution of the nature of the violence
7 in Basra.

8 I didn't come to this job with this understanding.
9 This understanding grew in me very quickly from the
10 briefings I received, principally from military people,
11 and their analysis, which I enormously respected and
12 still respect.

13 Now, there were occasions when we had to put our
14 foot on the brake, there were occasions when we could
15 move forward. There were occasions when we had to look
16 to our coalition partners for some sort of support, and
17 it wasn't just the Americans, you know, we had other
18 coalition partners, including the Danes and the
19 Italians. I was in constant contact with our coalition
20 partners as we adjusted to try to create the optimum
21 opportunity for the development of the resources that we
22 believed would deal with this issue.

23 So contentedness was never a word that, you know,
24 was -- would have described my state of mind at any
25 time. This was a constant state of considering the

1 tactical circumstances, taking advice, supporting our
2 people on the ground, doing some quite difficult and
3 radical things on occasions, all towards the objective,
4 which came about, I think, rather prematurely, actually,
5 in March 2008, but we may come to that in a moment, I'm
6 not anticipating. It came about rather prematurely,
7 but, even then, we were able to respond, and all against
8 the background of a very difficult communications
9 environment of -- particularly a communications
10 environment in which there was no -- there was no
11 appetite for an explanation of the building of Iraqi
12 capacity in terms of --

13 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: You are talking communications in
14 the UK or in Iraq?

15 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Absolutely here, and the effect that
16 that had on the families of those people whom we
17 deployed. So contentedness, I wouldn't describe myself
18 as being content at any stage.

19 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I want to hand over to Sir Roderic,
20 but just before --

21 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't mean to interrupt you, but
22 can I try to answer what I think was the implication of
23 the question?

24 We had a limited amount of resource and, of course,
25 in 2003 -- sorry, we made decisions in relation to

1 Afghanistan as well and we only had one army. So we had
2 a limited amount of resource and I had to operate within
3 the restraints of that limited amount of resource.

4 So I mean, I accept that there were limitations on
5 what we could do, but I say now, and I am confirmed in
6 this view, having re-read acres of paperwork, that it
7 wouldn't have mattered to some degree what we did in the
8 interim. The challenges that the people of Basra faced
9 would not have been dealt with in a sustainable fashion
10 until the combination of those two factors came
11 together; that is the Iraqis' military or security
12 capability and their political leadership.

13 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think this is a very good point to
14 hand over to Sir Roderic.

15 SIR RODERIC LYNE: As you rightly say, we only had one army
16 and the question of Afghanistan was coming up. I just
17 wondered if I could ask one or two questions about the
18 interplay between Afghanistan and Iraq.

19 Just to recap, I think before you came into office
20 on 5 May 2006, a decision had already been taken,
21 although not yet implemented, to make a significant
22 increase in the number of troops we had in Afghanistan
23 from about 1,000 to 5,400. If we just look at the way
24 the numbers run over the next year or two, that meant
25 that in late 2006 we still had 7,100 in Iraq, according

1 to the data we have been given. Afghanistan had gone up
2 from 5,400 to 6,300 by late 2006, and then, looking
3 ahead into 2007, Iraq goes down 5,500 to 4,500, while
4 Afghanistan continues to go up 6,300 in April, 7,800 in
5 late 2007.

6 We heard from Geoff Hoon the other day, your
7 predecessor but one, that in July 2004, he had taken the
8 position that it was necessary for us to reduce our
9 commitment in Iraq before taking on increasing
10 commitments in Afghanistan.

11 Now, obviously, that was two years previously. By
12 the time you come into office, as I say, the first
13 decision had been taken. What advice were you hearing
14 from the military about the impact on them of increasing
15 Afghanistan's numbers at a time when we were still in
16 very large numbers in Iraq?

17 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The decision to deploy forces into
18 Helmand province in particular in Afghanistan was
19 a decision which I was party to. I mean, there was
20 a group of ministers which became known as the
21 Reid Group because John Reid chaired it, which, over
22 a period of months, considered against the very
23 significant constraints and conditions that John Reid
24 put on what needed to be satisfied before we would
25 deploy our forces into Afghanistan, whether we were able

1 to do this.

2 I was, at the time, the Chief Secretary to the
3 Treasury, so at the end of the day, from the point of
4 view of access to the reserve, I had the responsibility
5 to ensure that we had the resources to be able to
6 support that financially.

7 So I mean, I was privy to that process and that
8 grouping met regularly. In fact, I think latterly, if
9 I remember correctly, on a weekly basis, and reported to
10 the Cabinet. Now, I heard -- well, I read of
11 Geoff Hoon's evidence. I mean, I have no recollection
12 candidly, you know, of Geoff Hoon expressing that
13 position, but I wasn't around in 2004. So if -- I can't
14 speak for that, but what I do know is -- and I can't
15 recollect and I did not have access to the documents to
16 be able to ascertain the specifics of this but John Reid
17 was very clear that he would not take to the Cabinet
18 a recommendation that we deploy into Afghanistan unless
19 the Chiefs of Staff -- unless the military advice was
20 that we were able to do that with the resources that we
21 had.

22 Now, that wouldn't be the specific wording of it,
23 but he will remember them, I think, much more clearly
24 than I do. I came into the Ministry of Defence in the
25 knowledge that the military advice was that these two

1 operations were sustainable with our resources.

2 That, of course, became a great focus of
3 Parliamentary accountability and public observation on
4 the time that I was the -- when I was the Secretary of
5 State, and it was constantly discussed at the highest
6 level in the department with the Chiefs of Staff.
7 I think the Chief of the Defence Staff, on one occasion,
8 described the army as "running hot", but that it was
9 do-able, and I made perfectly clear that I recognised
10 that we were using our resources to their limit, and
11 that that position would be unsustainable.

12 I have to say one of the learning processes that
13 I went through as the Secretary of State for Defence was
14 the counter-intuitive learning that, if you deploy
15 people in operations, you destroy your capability rather
16 than maintaining it. That wasn't, to me, as a person
17 with no military experience, very clear at first, but
18 I came to understand what they meant by that, and
19 I said -- and I think there is lots of public record of
20 this -- that, "I understand that we are stretching our
21 resources, and that, if we sustain this, then we will --
22 we are in danger of doing damage, but that we do not
23 intend to maintain this", and that's what proved to be
24 the case.

25 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Some of the generals who have already

1 given evidence have perhaps gone beyond "running hot"
2 and simply that it was damaging the time to recuperate,
3 retrain and so on, and really have suggested that one
4 was having to make priority decisions between Iraq and
5 Afghanistan. General Cooper, for example, said:

6 "We can't pretend that Afghanistan didn't have an
7 impact on force levels in Iraq."

8 General Shirreff:

9 "A decision had been taken to open up a second front
10 in Afghanistan before the situation in Iraq was
11 satisfactorily resolved:"

12 Whereas he said:

13 "A winning strategy was going to require significant
14 additional resources."

15 General Houghton talked of the need to rebalance in
16 order to regain strategic coherence in Afghanistan.

17 Now, you quoted the advice of the Chief of Staffs
18 that were given to your predecessor when he presented
19 the decision to Cabinet. Was there a recognition that
20 this did mean that some of the effort in Iraq would
21 suffer from increasing the troop numbers and the
22 equipment going to Afghanistan?

23 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: There is no doubt that Afghanistan
24 had an impact and it increased pressure on a finite
25 level of resources. My responsibility was on the advice

1 of the military to manage that against a long-term
2 strategy, which would see the numbers in Iraq reducing,
3 which was fixed in any event and was not related to the
4 fact that we were deploying troops into Afghanistan and
5 we did a significant number of things to do that.

6 I mean, there was particular pressure on certain
7 trained personnel whose deployment and the repetition of
8 their deployments were in breach of what was believed to
9 be an acceptable in terms of maintaining their skill
10 base and proper relationships and, you know, their
11 families.

12 I have to say -- and I can say this confidently --
13 at all stages I took and accepted the advice of the
14 military on these issues. I realise there was
15 a difficulty and there was a challenge. I'm equally not
16 conscious that there were things we did not or could not
17 do, particularly in Basra or in Iraq, because we had
18 troops deployed to Afghanistan.

19 Individual GOCs will use their own vocabulary to
20 describe what they were seeking to do, but I never had
21 any sense from any military person who advised me that
22 the strategy for MND (South East) would be a winning
23 strategy. It was a strategy of transition.

24 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Just two more questions on this, if I may
25 and then I think we should move on.

1 Did you feel that it to some extent increased the
2 pressure on you and on the generals to achieve the
3 transition within the timetable set, even if the
4 conditions for that were not what you ideally would have
5 wished?

6 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, no, I didn't, and I think I can
7 point to examples where we, as I said earlier, put our
8 foot on the brake because circumstances on the ground
9 didn't allow us to do what we had planned to do.

10 I mean, the best example of that is that we
11 maintained our force level at 4,000 in the immediate
12 aftermath of the Charge of the Knights when we clearly
13 had a plan to reduce our force level to 2,500, and we
14 put that into the public domain.

15 So we were in a constant environment where people
16 were demanding from us in a conditional environment some
17 timeline, resisting that timeline, but giving as much
18 information as we thought would give people, and
19 particularly the forces, some indication as to what was
20 happening, and then being criticised for not meeting
21 these alleged timelines that we had avoided giving.

22 So, in fact, the opposite is the case. Where we
23 felt the strategic environment or the operational demand
24 required that we do not press ahead with something that
25 we had planned to do in optimum circumstances, we didn't

1 do it. So I didn't feel under pressure and I never at
2 any stage am conscious of having removed resources from
3 Iraq in order to deploy them to Afghanistan.

4 I am conscious, however -- and this became much more
5 acute in relation to helicopters after I demitted
6 office. I am conscious that resources that had been
7 used in Iraq were subsequently deployed to Afghanistan,
8 but I never came under any pressure from the military or
9 from any political source to draw down our troops in
10 Iraq because of pressure from Afghanistan. I tried, as
11 far as I possibly could, mindful of the fact that we
12 have only one army and that we have only one pot of
13 resources to make decisions about both operational
14 environments based on the needs of those operational
15 environments.

16 SIR RODERIC LYNE: My final question on this subject: did
17 you feel at all that the combination of Afghanistan and
18 Iraq left you with, perhaps, not enough of a reserve,
19 should the situation in Iraq deteriorate and you need to
20 reinforce there?

21 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: We were part of a coalition in Iraq
22 and we were part of a coalition with the biggest army in
23 the world, the best-resourced army in the world that has
24 tens of thousands of troops which it proved it could
25 deploy once it made a decision.

1 I had a very strong personal relationship with the
2 secretary, both Bob Gates, the Defence Secretary, I had
3 good strong personal relationships and professional
4 relationships with General Petraeus and with those who
5 commanded those. I never believed that if we got to the
6 situation that we needed that sort of response, that we
7 would be left.

8 So actually, to be honest -- and maybe this is an
9 omission on my part -- I never concerned myself about
10 that, although I did know that we had -- and I have
11 explained earlier -- that we did, in fact, deploy the
12 reserve on occasions in Iraq in my time and we did the
13 same thing in Afghanistan. So there wasn't a great deal
14 of additional resources, but in the context of Iraq, we
15 were in a very significant coalition.

16 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you.

17 THE CHAIRMAN: Usha?

18 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Mr Browne, I would now like to move
19 on to look at the US and the UK policy at the end of
20 2006 and the beginning of 2007, because it was
21 in December 2006, the Baker-Hamilton report, the Iraq
22 Study Group Report recommended the beginning of a phased
23 withdrawal of US troops, and it also discussed the
24 possibility of the need to divert troops from Iraq to
25 Afghanistan.

1 Was this report in line with what your American
2 interlocutors were telling you in the last month of
3 2006?

4 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: It is a very specific question, and
5 I have to say that I would be -- I would be, to
6 a degree, guessing about precisely that time.

7 My strong recollection of that time when the
8 Baker-Hamilton report was published, was that the
9 American administration and the American military
10 leadership said, "We will take some time to consider
11 this and we will give a considered response", and my
12 recollection was that that's what they were saying to me
13 as well, because I think there may well be, you know,
14 public recording of me being interviewed about this at
15 the time, in which I said, "That's what they have said
16 they will do, and I think that's a very wise thing for
17 them to do".

18 So my recollection was that they were playing their
19 cards very close to their chest. They had the
20 Baker-Hamilton Report and they said they would take some
21 time to consider this. So they weren't telling me
22 anything separately from what was being published.
23 That's my recollection. I will have to go back
24 specifically and check at the time, I hadn't anticipated
25 that question.

1 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you were not really aware of what
2 they were thinking? You were aware of the
3 recommendations but you were not aware of what they
4 might do about it?

5 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I wouldn't expect to be a party to
6 their analysis of this. I would expect that they would
7 be consistent to the posture that they already had and
8 to what we had agreed to do with them in strategic and
9 in operational terms, and consistently they stuck to
10 that.

11 Can I just say that one of the constant challenges
12 I faced was that there were many people who were telling
13 me regularly what the Americans thought? Most of them
14 were not Americans, and many people were telling me from
15 commentators, interviewers and others, that: if you do
16 this, the Americans will never live with this.

17 It was never my experience. My experience was that
18 the Americans were very open and they were very
19 understanding of the difference, the nature of the
20 different violence that we faced in Basra from what they
21 were facing in areas that they had responsibility for.

22 It wasn't difficult to explain to people like their
23 Defence Secretary or to General Petraeus or to any of
24 the senior American officers that I had to deal with,
25 General Odierno or others, what we were doing and why we

1 were doing it, and they were very supportive, in my
2 experience, all the time.

3 So there wasn't this divergence, nor was there
4 secrecy. They had their own domestic politics, and, if
5 you remember exactly where their domestic politics was
6 at that stage, it would have been entirely inappropriate
7 for me, a minister in our government, to be seeking to
8 intervene in their domestic considerations of these
9 issues. What I had to make sure is that we had
10 a certainty that they would stick to what they had
11 agreed to do with us, and they did.

12 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Coming back to the Baker-Hamilton
13 Report, did this report actually influence our strategy
14 of phased withdrawal and diversion of troops to Iraq --

15 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I think probably -- sorry.

16 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: -- from Iraq to Afghanistan?

17 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I'm sorry, I think it may well have
18 been the other way round. We were in a position of
19 phased withdrawal and transition before the
20 Baker-Hamilton Committee even started considering, and
21 I'm sure they drew on -- in fact, if I recollect
22 correctly, they may well have made reference to what we
23 were doing in their report, but I can't remember the
24 detail of it at this remove well enough, but my sense
25 was it was probably the other way round, in terms of we

1 had this model which they drew on and were advancing.

2 Of course, as it turns out, that's not what the
3 administration did but, it wasn't a case of their
4 thinking was influencing us.

5 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But in the end, of course,

6 President Bush went down a different route entirely?

7 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: He did.

8 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: He decided to surge rather than draw
9 down the troops. Was this a surprise to you?

10 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: No, I don't think it was a surprise
11 to me, because this was a very deliberative approach
12 and, candidly, as I recollect, there was quite a lot of
13 speculation, and with all forms of government nowadays
14 in democratic societies, there was quite a lot of
15 speculation, informed or otherwise, and briefing going
16 on, so the idea that they might reject the
17 recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton Report in fact was
18 pretty much in the public domain before it was
19 announced.

20 So it wasn't really a surprise to me, apart from
21 anything else, but, if you are asking: was I briefed on
22 it by Americans? No, I wasn't briefed on it by
23 Americans until a comparatively short time before it was
24 announced.

25 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: What impact did that have on our

1 strategy and our planning?

2 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, the first thing, of course, it
3 did was it put us in a contrasting position with the
4 Americans and immediately allowed commentators to say
5 that we were doing it wrong.

6 We then had to devote energy, as we periodically had
7 to do to energising our principal coalition partner to
8 say, "No, they are not doing it wrong. They are in
9 a different position. Listen to us if you will not
10 listen to them".

11 So, as in many areas of communication, we had to
12 divert resources, as it were, from the priority, which
13 was doing on the ground to addressing again the
14 communications issue, explaining why that was important,
15 and getting people like General Petraeus, who knew and
16 understood this on the occasions when he visited here,
17 to make a point of explaining what his view was, which
18 he did, because he understood it. But it had no effect
19 on changing the overall strategy.

20 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you didn't consider increasing
21 our troops at any stage?

22 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: No.

23 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: This was never recommended to you by
24 the commanders on the ground or by the Americans?

25 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I have to say the contrary, actually.

1 The contrary. My advisers were saying to me, "You need
2 to understand that this -- while this is -- or it may
3 prove to be the appropriate thing to do, because of the
4 nature of the violence which the Americans are facing
5 and the coalition partners are facing in the area around
6 Baghdad and, you know, Anbar province and in the west
7 have, this is not appropriate for us".

8 There was a significant increase in violence right
9 across Iraq, but about 80 per cent of the violence was
10 in four provinces, and those four provinces, 80 per cent
11 of the -- they measured the violence by the attacks.
12 80 per cent of the attacks were in four provinces and
13 they were all in the Americans' area of responsibility.
14 About 3 per cent, they estimated was in MND (South East)
15 and 2 per cent of that was in Basra province itself.

16 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: We heard from General Sheriff that
17 the UK strategy was an exit strategy rather than
18 a winning strategy. Would you agree with that?

19 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I'm not being pedantic about this,
20 but this is just not the phraseology I would use.
21 I have already said earlier, nobody advised or briefed
22 me when I became the Secretary of State for Defence,
23 that what we were trying to do in Iraq was to win a war.
24 What we were doing by then was we were trying to -- I'm
25 repeating myself now, but help the Iraqis to cope with

1 this diverse and difficult environment that is Iraq and
2 is a result of decades, if not centuries, you know, of
3 violence in that diversity, and in a way that they could
4 take responsibility for it.

5 So I never at any stage thought that we could win
6 the war against the insurgents or the militias. Nobody
7 ever suggested to me that that was a possibility. In
8 fact, almost every conversation I ever had about
9 insurgency with a senior military officer or
10 a strategist started with the phrase:

11 "This cannot be won by military means."

12 We were about creating and holding the space that
13 was necessary for the Iraqis to develop the capability,
14 both politically and in security terms, to be able to
15 run their own affairs. So I mean, I respect
16 General Shirreff enormously. He chooses to use that
17 vocabulary, but it is not vocabulary I would use.

18 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you are saying that when Prime
19 Minister Blair said, "It is not so much what we want to
20 do in Basra, but what we want Basrawian people to do so
21 for themselves ..."?

22 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: We were in a coalition, but the most
23 important partners in this coalition were the Iraqis
24 themselves. They had had a democratic election. They
25 are a sovereign country. They had a sovereign

1 government. It was a frustration to me on occasions
2 that they were a sovereign country and that they had
3 a sovereign government and that they would make
4 decisions which would be a change of what they may have
5 said to me they would do before, but it was
6 a manifestation of where their politics was at the time.

7 But I also was pleased that politics was working,
8 because I believe in politics, and it was difficult and
9 frustrating and it didn't follow, you know, a linear
10 timeline, and there were lots of blips in it and there
11 were occasions when they would not deliver on what they
12 said they could because the politics couldn't deliver.

13 So -- but they were the important people.

14 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: You did say earlier that this was
15 a question of transition and making sure the Iraqi
16 institutions were working well. Do you think that we
17 were working at the right sort of pace or were we
18 actually rushing? What's your assessment in terms of
19 timing and the way the transition was managed?

20 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: There were lots -- there was lots of
21 consultation going on. You know, we had some
22 exceptionally high quality ambassadors in Iraq who were
23 in constant conversation with the Iraqi Government. We
24 had the senior British military officer in Iraq, who was
25 the number 2 to the American coalition commander. So we

1 had people at the highest level, who were in constant
2 conversation at the highest level, and we, at the
3 provincial level in Basra, Maysan, Muthanna province and
4 Dhi Qar, when we had responsibility for it, were
5 constantly in conversation with the political
6 leadership, not just the local governments, but the
7 opposition and other people who would engage with us.

8 Part of the problem we had in Basra was as
9 a consequence of the Jamiat police station
10 in September 2005 before the Provincial Council
11 boycotted us, and we found it difficult to engage with
12 them for most of the time that I was the Secretary of
13 State for Defence.

14 So I have no sense that we were driving this. Can
15 I say to you my constant recollection is that the Shia
16 politics was encouraging us to go faster?

17 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you are saying that we were
18 responding to the pressures on the ground?

19 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Yes, we always were conscious of the
20 environment that we were living in, the capacity of the
21 Iraqis to be able to do it -- to achieve what needed to
22 be achieved, the leadership of their military or the
23 police force or whatever, and if the implication of your
24 question is that we transitioned too quickly in relation
25 to what they wanted, then the opposite was the case

1 actually; we were quite often saying to them, "We need
2 to go a wee bit more slowly here".

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Is it fair to say -- in essence, I take you
4 to mean, in fact, the thrust of Shia politics,
5 particularly in the south in Basra province, was running
6 ahead of the Iraqi military readiness to accept full
7 responsibility? General Mohan had his own sense of
8 timing and would be advising Prime Minister Maliki on
9 that. Is that fair?

10 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Absolutely. We planned to do a form
11 of what happened in Charge of the Knights, but we
12 planned to do it many months later, but clearly
13 Prime Minister Maliki made the decision that the optimum
14 time to do it was when he did it in March. It proved
15 politically to be correct and he knew his own politics,
16 but militarily it was a challenging environment.

17 THE CHAIRMAN: And risky?

18 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: There was an element of risk in it,
19 absolutely. There was an element of risk, but there is
20 no doubt that those risks were managed by responses from
21 us -- from the Americans, who brought down certain
22 resources and brought down mentors with them, and they
23 also brought other equipment with them, but it was also
24 managed by the politics.

25 I'm not privy to the discussions that took place,

1 but I am in no doubt that it was partly managed by the
2 politics among the Shia, and I have no doubt that there
3 were consultations with the Iranians, because they had
4 an influence. I don't know what happened precisely
5 because I wasn't privy to those discussions, but the
6 politics were very important.

7 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: The United States, the coalition
8 were actually supportive and working with us?

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I never had any sense, at any time,
10 that the people at the strategic level that I operated
11 with didn't understand or support what we were seeking
12 to do.

13 That's not to say that you will not be able to find
14 in documents observations from people lower down the
15 chain of command, expressing views about the British
16 army's performance or what they were doing or what --
17 whether the strategy was right or wrong, but at the
18 level that I operated and the people that I was involved
19 with, I never had any sense of that, and I can point --
20 you know, in public record, to many occasions when
21 Americans articulated here in London or in Baghdad, and
22 sometimes in Washington, their support for what we were
23 seeking to do, and I had discussions with senior
24 Americans throughout the time that I was Secretary of
25 State for Defence in which they said they were doing the

1 same things in some provinces.

2 They transitioned a significant number of provinces
3 when we were doing what we were doing. So we weren't
4 the only people, you know, who were handing over
5 responsibility to the Iraqis.

6 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: I think we will just do a very small number
8 of questions before the break. So I'll ask
9 Sir Martin Gilbert to pick up the questioning.
10 Sir Martin?

11 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: You have spoken to
12 Sir Lawrence Freedman about the challenges in Basra and
13 I would like to take you back, if I may, briefly
14 to June 2006 shortly after you became Secretary of State
15 for Defence, when the Basra Security Plan was developed.
16 The objectives of the plan were to remove the -- as
17 it was put, the immunity and impunity with which the
18 Governor of Basra of whom you have spoken, was providing
19 patronage for the assassination squads, and also to
20 target the rogue Jaysh Al Mahdi leadership, and finally
21 to target and reform the corrupt police agencies.

22 Can you tell us how the Basra Security Plan was
23 devised and what resources were required for it.

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The Basra Security Plan was developed
25 in the operational environment because it was an

1 operational plan and it was -- I have no doubt that it
2 was developed in the context of the resources that were
3 available.

4 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Were the discussions about the
5 resources coming in your time or had they already been
6 determined?

7 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't, at that time, have any
8 recollection of being asked for additional resources.
9 I have to say I do not have any recollection of ever
10 being asked for additional resources or additional
11 troops or additional support when it wasn't given.
12 I have no recollection of refusing any request that was
13 ever made, but I don't specifically have any
14 recollection, Sir Martin, of being asked for additional
15 resources at that time for that plan.

16 Of course, that plan was of limited success in terms
17 of its deployment and it subsequently became
18 Operation Sinbad, but the limitation on their ability to
19 be able to deliver against those objectives was
20 a political limitation.

21 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: I move on to Operation Sinbad. Again,
22 I suppose, the same question arises. This was a plan
23 for a series of short pulses to improve security in
24 Basra. Again, what did you understand was needed in
25 terms of resources to make Sinbad a success?

1 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I was briefed regularly in
2 anticipation of what became Operation Sinbad. It wasn't
3 originally called Operation Sinbad, but we went -- what
4 became Operation Sinbad, and I was briefed throughout
5 the time of Operation Sinbad as it progressed through
6 the city of Basra.

7 The specific resources -- I mean, I have no
8 recollection of any additional specific resources being
9 asked for, but -- my suspicion is -- and I'm sure that
10 the documentation will bear this out -- that the
11 resources that would have been deployed at the RIB would
12 have been designed to deliver. But it wouldn't
13 necessarily be the case that every single request, you
14 know, through PJHQ up to the chiefs for a particular
15 piece of resource, would come to me, but I have no
16 recollection of anybody saying, "We need significant
17 additional resources to do this", and, therefore, my
18 sense is that the troops that were deployed would be
19 deployed to make the best use of the resources that we
20 had to deliver this plan, which was already, you know,
21 in the offing.

22 It changed quite significantly, however, the plan,
23 in September, from those objectives to something less
24 than those objectives in terms of security, and the
25 reasons it changed was because the Prime Minister

1 indicated that he would not support some of the
2 consequences in terms of detentions.

3 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Prime Minister Maliki?

4 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Prime Minister Maliki, yes. Maybe
5 I should be clear.

6 THE CHAIRMAN: I think, throughout, the reference has been
7 in this session to Prime Minister Maliki.

8 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Yes, I mean, we're not talking about
9 politics and the Prime Minister. That was the
10 environment we were working in. I mean, our
11 Prime Minister was not determining, but
12 Prime Minister Maliki was very hands-on, for very
13 obvious reasons which I fully understood. He was very
14 hands-on about how we deployed our forces in an area
15 where he had a significant political interest, and the
16 future of Iraq, as he saw it, could be affected by what
17 we did.

18 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: So was it, in a sense, the inability to
19 pursue Sinbad to a successful conclusion that led to
20 Zenith, the decision to pull out of Basra from
21 Basra Palace and to move to the airport?

22 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: They didn't happen in sequence like
23 that. I mean, we planned -- this is very unmilitary,
24 but we planned to sweep through the city and clean it
25 up, effectively, and we had a particular objective to

1 try to clean up the police. So we were -- we -- in
2 certain parts of the city intended to move into the --
3 the police were having a malign effect on security, and,
4 indeed, may well have been, in our view, making up many
5 of the death squads that were operating. So we planned
6 to move through the city and clean up the police, and
7 then, having done that, we planned to move into
8 Operation Zenith.

9 So Operation Zenith wasn't a consequence, it was, as
10 I recollect, a progression, because there was this
11 process and then we were going to move into
12 Operation Zenith. The intention was that we would
13 improve the situation to the optimum that we could,
14 subject to the political direction of the government,
15 and then we would move into a process of transition and
16 that the Iraqis would come and put security presence
17 into the city.

18 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: So finally, what actually determined
19 the timing of Zenith, was that, again, an Iraqi
20 political decision as much as ours?

21 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Zenith started, as I recollect it,
22 about January 2007 before Sinbad concluded.
23 Operation Sinbad was in its later phases and then it
24 moved out into the outskirts of the city, as it were,
25 and Zenith started in about January.

1 So they were planned to work like that, and indeed,
2 I think there was a change of GOC. Jonathan Shaw may
3 have come in and taken over the final stages of Sinbad
4 and started Zenith.

5 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: This was essentially an
6 Iraqi Government desiderata?

7 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't want to leave the impression
8 at that time Iraqis were telling us what to do, but they
9 were, on occasions, telling us what we couldn't do, you
10 know, and that's entirely correct because they were
11 a sovereign government and it was their people. You
12 know? So they were putting limitations on how we could
13 deploy our forces in their country, and we accepted that
14 because that was part of the process of the development
15 of their politics and their confidence in their
16 politics.

17 So the question you asked me doesn't account for the
18 complexity of the environment we were in. We were in
19 a coalition, there were constant discussions going on.
20 I mean, we were constantly consulting with our allies,
21 not just the Americans, but others -- the Danes, you
22 know, were there in significant numbers in proportionate
23 terms for them and they were involved with us.

24 So there was a constant process of discussion going
25 on all the time, and we had General Mohan and

1 General Jalil eventually, who were deployed with us and
2 on an everyday basis working with us. So we weren't
3 waiting for them to tell us what to do. They were
4 putting plans to them, discussing them with the
5 coalition, discussing them with the government and they
6 were making their contribution to it.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: I think it is time for a short break. We
8 will break for about ten minutes.

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Thank you.

10 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

11 (3.06 pm)

12 (Short break)

13 (3.16 pm)

14 THE CHAIRMAN: I'll ask Sir Lawrence to reopen the
15 questions.

16 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: You mentioned the issue of
17 helicopters in an answer to Sir Roderic in terms of the
18 competition for resources of Iraq and Afghanistan.

19 Would you accept that, even before the commitments
20 to Afghanistan, there was concern already being
21 expressed that we simply didn't have enough helicopters
22 to perform the military tasks that we had set for
23 ourselves?

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Yes, there was concern being
25 expressed.

1 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: How severe would you say was the
2 problem? What was the gap between what we needed and
3 what we had?

4 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: People would always say to me in the
5 Ministry of Defence that -- you have to understand that
6 operational commanders could always use more resources,
7 and to a degree, and quite a significant degree, and I'm
8 sure even the Americans, who appear to have limitless
9 resources, planned what they can do because of the
10 resources that they have available, and I --
11 I recognised the importance, and the increasing
12 importance, of helicopters from the point of view of
13 secure transport, and the more the threat -- the nature
14 of the risk adapted and changed -- and it did change
15 quite dramatically in the time that I was Secretary of
16 State for Defence -- the more important it became for us
17 to be able to move in the air as opposed to on the
18 ground.

19 But the -- so my focus was not on trying to fill
20 a gap, my focus was on trying to maximise the
21 helicopters, and, also, at the same time, the protected
22 mobility that our troops had, so that they could do more
23 than they were doing, or do it safer.

24 So I can't answer your question in those terms, but
25 what I can say to you is that not long after I became

1 the Secretary of State for Defence, we identified,
2 sourced effectively 6 million helicopters that the Danes
3 had on order, that they were prepared to allow us to
4 buy, and I made a decision about Chinook helicopters
5 that we had, which had been equipped in a very
6 sophisticated way for our special forces, but had never
7 flown, about stripping out that sophistication, and
8 turning them -- we are only now seeing the benefit, as
9 it were, of those decisions because of the timeline that
10 it takes to get those deployable and to train the crews
11 in order to fly them.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think it is this timeline that is
13 really quite important. Can I quote to you from the
14 Public Accounts Committee of February 2005, which is
15 obviously before you have taken over:

16 "As regards the number of helicopters, there remains
17 an alarming gap, 20 per cent or 38 per cent, depending
18 on how it is measured, in the number of helicopters
19 needed and those available. The department ..."

20 And this is the key thing:

21 "The department is no longer proposing to fill this
22 gap and this will potentially increase risks, including
23 the risks of overstressing equipment and pilots."

24 So my point is that it was well-known that
25 a decision had already been taken -- we have discussed

1 with Mr Hoon some of the background to that decision --
2 not to make provision for helicopters in the future, and
3 so what you are describing is a situation where you come
4 in with two operations underway and you are having to
5 resort to expedience, Merlin helicopters, changing the
6 role of Chinooks so that they come out of storage, in
7 order that we can start to cope. It is not a very good
8 state of affairs, is it?

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: That's a very leading question --

10 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: It is indeed.

11 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: -- which is quite complicated.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Not really. I mean, there is
13 a decision not being taken.

14 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, Sir Lawrence, I was not party
15 to, nor was I in the part of government at the time that
16 those decisions may or may not have been taken.

17 Now, there was no part of my time spent reviewing or
18 analysing those decisions. What my focus was was on
19 finding the resources that we needed to support our
20 troops in the operational environment. We -- we were in
21 a situation where the nature of the attacks upon our
22 troops changed in a very crude but sophisticated fashion
23 quite dramatically. That required that we use the
24 resources that we had available and identified other
25 resources in order to respond to that.

1 So my focus was on: how can we get more helicopters?
2 How can we identify and source somewhere in the world
3 vehicles which we can up-armour, that we can use in this
4 operational environment and can protect our people much
5 better?

6 Now, I mean, you quote a particular committee
7 report. I'm very pleased to be able to say that, in May
8 of 2009, the National Audit Office issued what
9 I consider to be a very balanced report -- it was after
10 I had left the department -- about what I was
11 responsible for and what people did subsequently, and
12 what Paul Drayson did, in order to respond to that
13 environment. So -- that's what my focus was on. You
14 are inviting me to comment really --

15 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: You are in a very difficult
16 situation with two major operations on, and -- just to
17 look at particular consequences, as you have indicated,
18 one of the problems, if you don't have helicopters, is
19 you have got to move on the ground, and if you have got
20 to move on the ground, then you are very dependent upon
21 the vehicles you have got -- and this is where the whole
22 Snatch Land Rover issue comes in -- and you have
23 indicated, as the improvised explosive devices got more
24 sophisticated, the greater problems we had.

25 So there are real consequences of past decisions,

1 and I accept that you are not responsible for them, it
2 is how they impact on you trying to do your job.

3 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I lived in the environment that
4 I inherited, yes. Am I in a position to make a kind of
5 qualitative judgment about that, that you invite me to,
6 with a question which had 16 sentences in it.

7 I'm not prepared to do that, because the focus of
8 what I was doing was entirely different than that, and
9 I haven't spent any of my time as the Secretary of State
10 for Defence analysing why I was in that situation in
11 order to make this judgment.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But I'm drawing your attention to
13 a particular problem that you then had to deal with,
14 which was the Snatch Land Rover problem that has
15 a direct link with the helicopter issue.

16 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, my first point in response to
17 that is that helicopters are important, and I spent so
18 much time and energy, and our department did, through
19 the process of UORs and otherwise, to get additional
20 helicopters as an indication of how much we thought that
21 was important, and I'm pleased to see that what we did
22 is supported by this analysis in a very balanced way.
23 It is not completely complimentary, there are some
24 criticisms in there and they are justified, and we are
25 now seeing the benefit of that, because you can't just

1 go and get these helicopters easily.

2 As far as vehicles are concerned, I don't
3 necessarily accept that the use of Snatch Land Rovers
4 was a consequence of an absence of helicopters. In
5 fact, I don't ever remember being advised by the
6 military that the Snatch Land Rover had no use in the
7 operational environment either in Iraq or Afghanistan.

8 In fact, if anything, I would say that the pressure,
9 from the point of view to examine and continually
10 re-examine the use of Snatch Land Rovers, came from the
11 kind of political environment to the military rather
12 than the other way around, and I would also say to you
13 that, no matter how many helicopters you have, if you
14 are in an environment with insurgents, you need to get
15 people on the ground. You need to have people out there
16 on foot and in vehicles.

17 The way in which you present to the community that
18 you are trying to work with is very important. So the
19 vehicles that you use tell those communities a lot about
20 what you are wanting to do with them, and that's
21 important. So helicopters aside, you know, we would
22 have had to have found a way of finding more protective
23 vehicles, and we did, for our troops, and, you know, we
24 have spent billions of pounds on trying to source them,
25 to equip them and to get them into the operational

1 environment.

2 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We have to move on, but can I just
3 ask you one more question on this?

4 We have also heard that General Houghton said to us
5 that he would like to have given General Shirreff some
6 attack helicopters but he couldn't because they were
7 needed for Afghanistan. So do you accept that there was
8 a shortage of attack helicopters as well?

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: That's the first -- I mean, when
10 General Houghton gave that evidence, that was the first
11 I had heard of that. I mean, we did deploy attack
12 helicopters in support of the task force that we sent to
13 Helmand province, because we sent them to Helmand
14 province for a very specific reason, but they were
15 a back-up, and as it turned out, of course, they were
16 necessary and important.

17 The attack helicopters were used, but they weren't
18 ours, they were from the coalition, but they were used
19 in MND (South East) in my time as Secretary of State for
20 Defence.

21 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So you were surprised to find out at
22 this stage that there had been a concern --

23 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: No, I'm not surprised. I'm just
24 telling you that nobody said to me, you know, "Can we
25 deploy our attack helicopters to MND (South East)?"

1 When we needed attack helicopters in
2 MND (South East), we got them from the coalition. As
3 far as I'm aware, the American helicopters came down,
4 but we were in a coalition, and, you know, we provided
5 things to the coalition that were unique and Americans
6 provided equipment and support to us.

7 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think we had better leave it
8 there.

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I think it is important,
10 Sir Lawrence. I'm conscious of the time, but you read
11 to me a part of an accountant's evidence.

12 I have enormous respect for Nick Houghton, but it
13 doesn't say that General Shirreff asked him for attack
14 helicopters and he couldn't give them to him.

15 Now, if that conversation took place between them,
16 it didn't come up to me. That's what I'm telling you.
17 I'm not surprised, because there are lots of
18 conversations that take place before --

19 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: All it is is an indication of the
20 difficulty of balancing two major operations at once.

21 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Just two quick questions relating
22 to June 2007. Gordon Brown at that time takes over as
23 Prime Minister. Was there any change in the approach
24 from the top towards Iraq or in the prioritisation of
25 Iraq and Afghanistan at the Prime Minister's level?

1 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Not -- no, there wasn't.

2 SIR RODERIC LYNE: No. You remained Secretary of State for
3 Defence, but you also, at this stage, became
4 concurrently Secretary of State for Scotland.

5 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I did.

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Did that create a difficulty for you in
7 attending to your very big raft of issues as
8 Defence Secretary?

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: It didn't create a difficulty for me
10 in the sense that I spent any less time or effort in
11 what I was doing in the Ministry of Defence.

12 What it did was, it made me significantly dependent
13 on my very able deputy in the Scotland office and it bit
14 into the little time that I had for my families and some
15 of the time that I had for my constituents, and, I mean,
16 that's how I answered the questions at the time, and an
17 examination of my diary, which was comprehensive, by the
18 opposition, proved that to be the case. There wasn't
19 a day went by that we didn't have to, in both
20 departments, answer questions about what I was doing.

21 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But this was unprecedented for
22 a Defence Secretary to hold another Cabinet post at the
23 same time.

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: It was. But responsibility for quite
25 a significant amount of the delivery of public services

1 to Scotland is devolved, and it has been since 1999.

2 I mean, I would have continued to have been involved in
3 the Scottish politics, in any event, by the fact that
4 I was a member of Parliament for a Scottish
5 constituency, and still am.

6 You are right, people criticised it, and I agreed to
7 take it on on the understanding that I would get a very
8 able deputy who could do the bulk of the work.

9 THE CHAIRMAN: We are a lessons learned Inquiry, Mr Browne.
10 Looking to the future and not reflecting on your own
11 experience in the dual-hatted situation, is there
12 something which it would be wise for future
13 Prime Ministers to think very hard about before
14 recreating that situation?

15 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I don't think it would be wise for
16 any future Prime Minister to recreate that situation,
17 because I think, no matter what the reality is, the
18 public perception of it was disadvantageous, and it was
19 particularly disadvantageous to the wellbeing of the
20 families. Very few members of the military ever raised
21 this issue with me, but members of the families did.

22 THE CHAIRMAN: Lawrence, back to you.

23 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Yes, just quickly on the movement to
24 provincial Iraqi control and withdrawal from the city,
25 how were the timetables of this managed, because there

1 was a timetable for withdrawal, but there was
2 a particular process, which you have indicated before,
3 already, about the steps that had to go through in order
4 for PIC to be accepted, including the Iraqis and the
5 Americans, ticking the boxes.

6 Did you find it difficult to manage these two
7 timetables? Because PIC happened after we basically
8 moved out, or moved out from the city.

9 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Yes, we didn't move out from Basra.

10 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Not from Basra, sorry.

11 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The nature of Basra, the relationship
12 of the city to, you know, the wider province, the
13 complexity of the fact that we were deployed in there,
14 that we had, you know, we had a logistics base there, we
15 had a, you know, the COB as well, meant that we had to,
16 unlike Maysan or Muthanna or Dhi Qar, there was one
17 event, we had to do it progressively. We always planned
18 to do it progressively, but there only was one timeline
19 and that was a conditional timeline, and, you know, we
20 constantly assessed whether or not we were able to take
21 the next step, and, if we were able to take the next
22 step, then we took it.

23 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: How was this affected by debates in
24 London as well as debates in Iraq? Did you feel under
25 any pressure at all to move the timetable forward?

1 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I never felt any pressure to move the
2 timetable forward and, as I say, I mean, I actually
3 stopped the process at one stage for a significant
4 period of time, because we took the view that we needed
5 4,000 troops to continue to support the Iraqi army as
6 they were then deployed in Basra in the level of support
7 mentoring that they needed.

8 So I never felt under any pressure and, in fact,
9 with both Prime Ministers, I remember them questioning
10 constantly whether or not the environment, the whole
11 environment, including the Iraqi military capability,
12 was able to sustain the responsibilities that we were
13 putting on it at different stages.

14 So, if anything, you know, the interaction with
15 others would be to question whether or not we were
16 moving too quickly or whether we were ready to go. So
17 I wasn't under pressure to do it.

18 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: The last three months presumably
19 must have been a little tense, because we moved out and
20 PIC wasn't actually until December. Was there -- do you
21 think we would have been able to cope if the security
22 situation had taken a severe turn for the worse in that
23 period?

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, that's -- whether or not we
25 would have been able to deploy our forces if there was

1 a crisis, you know, was what overwatch was all about,
2 and, in fact, we tested that in Maysan because there was
3 an event in Maysan, a quite serious event, after
4 provincial Iraqi control and we deployed a battle group
5 into a strategic position to observe what was going on,
6 while the Iraqis, their politics and their own security,
7 resolved it.

8 So we knew that overwatch would work, and I was
9 reassured, as was the Prime Minister, by our military,
10 that we had the capability to be able to deploy should
11 anything untoward happen. As it turned out, the thing
12 that surprised us actually was Charge of the Knights.

13 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Before we get to Charge of the Knights,
14 in July 2007 we actually made the move from Basra City
15 to consolidate at the airport at a time when we were
16 being very heavily attacked in Basra City.

17 Major General Binns, who was in charge at the time,
18 said that, when we did this, when we came out of the
19 palace we had effectively de facto handed over control
20 to the Iraqi security forces in Basra province but we
21 hadn't de jure handed over Provincial Iraqi Control.

22 Did we actually hand over before we were confident
23 that the Iraqi security forces and police could handle
24 the situation?

25 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: We handed over in a situation where

1 we knew that the Iraqi security forces and the police
2 could only handle the situation if we got the politics
3 right. But the distinction between de facto and de jure
4 is, from my perspective, just an expression of the
5 reality. I mean, we -- until we had gone through the
6 process of Provincial Iraqi Control, then we hadn't
7 handed over, in a sense, the legal responsibility that
8 we had in terms of the Security Council Resolution and
9 the way in which we deployed our forces, but it wasn't
10 an expression of the fitness for -- of General Mohan,
11 you know, his troops, or General Jalil.

12 SIR RODERIC LYNE: General Binns was very complimentary
13 about General Mohan and his agreement to take
14 responsibility, and said he got us out of a bit of
15 a hole. Were you being advised back up the chain of
16 command that there was a high risk to what we were doing
17 at that time?

18 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The reality was that we were in
19 a situation where we had indicated to everybody,
20 including the militia, that we were planning to do this
21 and, as a consequence of that, we were being attacked
22 relentlessly.

23 The vast majority of the attacks were on us and any
24 attempt that was made by General Dannatt or anybody else
25 to try and explain that process was capable of the most,

1 I suppose, critical interpretation. But the reality was
2 that removing our troops from that environment, it was
3 expected that the attacks on that base and in that area
4 would be reduced, and they were.

5 SIR RODERIC LYNE: We were helped, of course, by
6 a ceasefire, but if the ceasefire had collapsed, which
7 it didn't, at least not immediately, obviously we would
8 have had to take a difficult decision. You would have
9 had to take a difficult decision about whether or not to
10 go back in.

11 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The ceasefire didn't happen until
12 29 August. I think Moqtadr Al Sadr declared a ceasefire
13 on 29 August. We were already removed by then, and then
14 there was a ceasefire.

15 There are two ways of looking at that, of course.
16 There is the way in which you suggest, but there is the
17 other way, which is to say we wouldn't have got that
18 ceasefire if we had still been there.

19 So we were making judgments about the ability of
20 this process, the interaction of these political
21 processes to start to make decisions, and they proved to
22 be correct. Of course, I can look back retrospectively
23 and say, if we had been wrong, then we would have been
24 challenged and it would have been difficult, but if we
25 weren't prepared to take some of these risks, we never

1 would have known.

2 So we were making judgments, and those judgments, in
3 the analysis, proved to be correct, just as the process
4 for Provincial Iraqi Control, despite the criticisms
5 that many people had of it, despite the enormous
6 appetite that there is in the country for people to say,
7 "When are you going to do this? When are you going to
8 do this? When are you going to do this?" and our
9 resistance to it proved to be correct, but it was
10 a difficult situation, and, of course, you are right, if
11 things had turned out not to be as they were, then we
12 would have been in different circumstances.

13 Did we have contingencies for that? Yes, we did.
14 Was I advised by the military that we would be able to
15 respond to anything that they thought would happen
16 there? Yes, I was. Did I believe them? Yes, I did.

17 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I think it would be wrong for
18 this session to go without some mention of the Operation
19 Charge of the Knights. We have heard a great deal of
20 evidence about it. A long-planned coalition and Iraq
21 operation, Prime Minister Maliki pressed the button, to
22 pretty well everybody's surprise, earlier and it worked.
23 That said, there are one or two things probably worth
24 bringing out. Martin?

25 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: First of all, I think on the question

1 of Charge of the Knights, one point that has been raised
2 by several witnesses is that we were not given any
3 notice by Prime Minister Maliki of this. Was this the
4 case, as far as you were concerned, and how did this
5 affect our position?

6 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I mean, you have to understand,
7 I lived in an environment sometimes, because of the
8 nature of our modern media, where things happened in the
9 operational environment and I saw them on the screen in
10 24-hour news before the processes could get a report to
11 me. So it wasn't unusual for things to happen in the
12 operational environment.

13 I do remember the effect that a Lynx helicopter
14 being shot down had on me, standing in my front room in
15 Edinburgh, on the day after I got the job, as it played
16 out on 24 hour news. So -- I was well used to an
17 environment in which things would happen, reporting up
18 through PJHQ, through the chiefs to through my private
19 office to me, but Operation Charge of the Knights was
20 a surprise to me, because, I mean, I was expecting that
21 General Mohan, whom I understood had the support of
22 Prime Minister Maliki and continued to get the support
23 of him after Operation Charge of the Knights, had his
24 plan, well developed. He was very well thought of both
25 by the coalition, in particular by our people, and this

1 operation, or an operation of this nature, would not
2 happen basically until about the autumn of the year. So
3 that it happened on 25 March in the spring of the year
4 was a surprise to me, yes.

5 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Security in Basra was not really our
6 responsibility at that time?

7 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I mean, we had a shared
8 responsibility for it. But we didn't have the primary
9 responsibility for it, no.

10 But, as I have said before, and I repeat, and
11 I think it is important, but I suspect you have got the
12 point that I'm trying to make, this was a sovereign
13 government. What we were trying to do was get
14 a democratically elected government in Iraq. We had one
15 and they were making decisions about their own people.

16 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: When did it become clear that UK forces
17 would have to intervene and, again, how was this
18 communicated.

19 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I think it became immediately
20 clear that this operation would require, I mean, air and
21 artillery and intelligence and medical and logistical
22 support, and that he was deploying troops which we were
23 mentoring into the city, I think logically meant that we
24 had to find a way of supporting them.

25 So it became immediately clear. It may well have

1 been a delay of some hours, maybe up to 48, before we
2 were able to provide some of the support that he needed,
3 but it became immediately clear that he needed support.

4 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: We anticipated that the forces we were
5 mentoring would not be able to perform as they might
6 have done?

7 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: The whole plan about mentoring, the
8 whole process of mentoring is that you will be with
9 those troops as they deploy and that you -- you know,
10 that they will learn on operational environment to the
11 extent that they are ready to be deployed into the
12 operational environment.

13 So the whole principle behind mentoring, I mean, the
14 Americans took this to a significant degree in Baghdad
15 where they co-located with Iraqi forces all over the
16 city of Baghdad through a long period of time and as
17 a consequence of the surge. But the idea was that we
18 would be with them and we were used to mentoring the
19 troops, but at a higher level.

20 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: So in a sense, the fact that they went
21 on their own initiative was something which we could
22 anticipate would not necessarily go well?

23 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I mean, I think in truth we had
24 not finished training the division that he deployed into
25 Basra. I'm not a military man and -- but I mean, even

1 I could work out that, if they hadn't finished their
2 training, then we might need to continue to support them
3 when they were deployed, and I'm sure that's exactly the
4 process, probably in a much more sophisticated fashion,
5 that the militia went through.

6 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: You have spoken with some emphasis
7 earlier about the coalition nature of these operations
8 and I wonder if you could, in that context, comment on
9 the involvement of the United States in this rescue
10 operation of Charge of the Knights and how that impacted
11 on our own responsibilities in MND (South East)?

12 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, as well as deploying these
13 local resources into Basra, the Prime Minister,
14 Prime Minister Maliki, that is, came down to Basra and
15 stayed there for a period of time and he brought with
16 him from Baghdad a command structure for this operation.

17 The Americans were completely integrated with that
18 command structure and came with it, bringing resources
19 that they had, and clearly there was then, in
20 a comparatively short period of time, quite
21 a significant number of very high level American
22 commanders, but these people were known to our military,
23 who had a good relationship with them. So we managed,
24 over a comparatively short period of time, to get
25 a change of command for this operation that involved the

1 Americans at a very high level and integrated our people
2 both on the ground and in the command structure.

3 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: What did you envisage would be the role
4 of the Americans in MND (South East) once we had
5 effectively withdrawn?

6 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Well, I mean, part of the process of
7 withdrawal was a constant discussion with the Americans
8 about how they would then deploy their forces in that
9 changing environment.

10 I mean, apart from anything else, there is only one
11 port in Iraq, and if the Americans, as they planned to
12 do, are going to remove their troops and a quite
13 significant amount of equipment, then they are going to
14 need that port facility, so taking charge of the
15 responsibility for the lines of communication to it and
16 as we came out, was important for them.

17 So, I fully anticipated that the Americans would
18 take over effectively the COB, but that we would have
19 a continuing presence in a certain number of niche areas
20 in a military sense. One example -- of course, there is
21 the -- nobody really discussed this very much when I was
22 the Secretary of State for Defence when it was going on,
23 we, in Um Qasr, were training the Iraqi Navy. It is
24 a small navy but it is very important, and we intend and
25 indeed have since continued to do that and make that

1 contribution. The Iraqis have an enormous appetite for
2 our military training and we had committed ourselves
3 through NATO and in other ways to certain commitments in
4 terms of training, and we want to keep that up.

5 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Finally, to those who say we should
6 have stayed to finish the job, would you argue that we
7 did finish the job and in what way had we done so?

8 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: That phrase "stay to finish the job"
9 a bit like the use of the word "winning", although this
10 is not meant to be a criticism of anybody that might use
11 it, suggests that this is, you know, a process in which
12 there was a clear beginning, a middle and an end.

13 In fact, this is a process, and it was entirely
14 right that we should transition to the Iraqis when they
15 were in a position take over, but it was never going to
16 be clear-cut. You know, we were never going to be able
17 to graduate the Iraqi politic, graduate the Iraqi
18 military and say, "Now you've got it", and this will be
19 clean. There was always going to be a period of time
20 where we were going to have to spend some time with them
21 and that's how it has turned out.

22 So -- I mean, do I think we have achieved progress
23 in terms of that? Yes, I do. Do I think that's good
24 for the Iraqis and good for the people of Basra? Well,
25 it has proved to be. The level of violence has gone

1 down dramatically. It would appear that the Iraqis are
2 building -- and we are about to face the next general
3 election in Iraq, the second in most people who live in
4 Iraq's memory in their lifetime. So things are
5 progressing in the right way from a very difficult set
6 of circumstances.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Time is running badly against us. We haven't
8 really touched much on those few months between spring
9 2008 and when you left the Defence Department.

10 I wondered, in what time we have got left, if you
11 could share with us, really, key lessons learned.

12 I have got a couple that would be good to hear about in
13 my own mind.

14 The first is the sustainability of this country to
15 run two sustained, though medium-scale, operations at
16 the same time and the tensions and strains that that
17 creates. Can we go on doing that? One is looking to
18 the future, a defence review maybe some time ahead.

19 The other is the inevitability in this world, where
20 we are acting in a coalition, the dominant partner will
21 be the United States, dominant by far over any other
22 player in the coalition universe. Are there lessons to
23 extract from those two things?

24 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: Very big questions. Our ability to
25 be able to conduct simultaneously two medium level

1 operations, if you say that, you know, they are
2 full-scale, all-out war is, at the highest level, in
3 a sustained fashion, inevitably will be a function of
4 the resources that we have and there is no question that
5 the lesson of Iraq, albeit that we were in this
6 transition phase and that we were running down in terms
7 of our commitment to it, and Afghanistan, which candidly
8 was not planned to move along the timeline that it
9 has -- we deployed in Helmand province, as I recollect
10 it, to do a very distinctly different thing than -- than
11 very quickly we turned out to have to do, because, as
12 all senior military officers tell me, the enemy gets
13 a vote and they can change, and the strategic
14 circumstances in Afghanistan changed quite dramatically
15 very, very quickly.

16 So the lesson is that, at the moment, we do not have
17 sufficient resources to be able to sustain that over the
18 long-term. Now, it turns out we haven't had to, we
19 didn't plan to and we achieved in broad terms that plan,
20 if, in the details of it, people can say, "You didn't do
21 this, and you didn't do that or that wasn't perfect".
22 So -- I mean, we are -- you know, in the foothills of
23 a strategic defence review. I doubt very much if the
24 strategic defence review is going to tell anybody very
25 much that they don't already know about the strategic

1 environment that we live in, about the nature of the
2 security threat, about the challenges that we will face,
3 about, you know, our responsibilities in the role in the
4 world that we cast ourselves in and that others cast us
5 in.

6 The question is whether or not this country -- and
7 it will come down to this, you know -- has the resources
8 or the political will or the collective will to commit
9 those resources to create the capabilities that we will
10 need. I mean, I'm not going to be, in any view, a part
11 of the decision-making process for that. So other
12 people have to take responsibility for that.

13 THE CHAIRMAN: There is a connection to the coalition
14 context and the American partner, because of its great
15 scale and our much lesser scale, and the degree to which
16 we can exert sufficient proportional influence over high
17 strategy in a coalition setting. Are there lessons for
18 that from the Iraq experience?

19 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: My sense was that both in Iraq and
20 Afghanistan the American military machine and its
21 political machine respected enormously what the Brits
22 did at a military level and at a political level.

23 Now, there are all sorts of arguments as to whether
24 we were ahead of them in our understanding of
25 counter-insurgency. I hear all of this very clever

1 stuff that people say, but the fact of the matter is,
2 and I have said this already, I spent a lot of my time
3 being told by people who were experts that the Americans
4 wouldn't wear what we were planning to do here, there
5 and everywhere, and I heard it in Afghanistan as well.

6 It wasn't my experience in dealing with the
7 Americans and I did not get the sense that the Americans
8 were not prepared to listen to us, and, interestingly,
9 if you look at the structures of command of the
10 coalition military, the Americans are always very
11 comfortable about having our senior people very close to
12 them, and sometimes, even after they retire from our
13 military, they bring them very close to them.

14 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Mr Browne. Is there any
15 last thing you would like to share with us or shall we
16 close now?

17 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I had anticipated that we might have
18 had a discussion about the complementary parts of what
19 is called the comprehensive approach.

20 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes.

21 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: I do have some views. Maybe I should
22 write to you about them?

23 THE CHAIRMAN: If you would, that would be much appreciated.
24 We have heard evidence about it from a number of
25 quarters, but not, of course, from yourself. That would

1 be helpful.

2 RT HON DES BROWNE MP: As Sir Lawrence pointed out,

3 I accepted quite an onerous responsibility in terms of
4 co-ordination at the beginning of my term of office for
5 Iraq, and I learned quite a lot. I may not have learned
6 it correctly, but I am prepared to share with you.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much again. We will close now
8 for ten minutes, and then resume, after ten minutes,
9 when our next witness will be John Hutton, who was your
10 as Defence Secretary, Mr Browne. Thank you.

11 (3.58 pm)

12 (Short break)

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