

1 (4.10 pm)

2 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Good afternoon, Mr Hutton.

4 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Hello.

5 THE CHAIRMAN: Let's open the second session of this  
6 afternoon, when we are taking evidence from the  
7 Rt Hon John Hutton MP, and you were Defence Secretary  
8 from October 2008 until June 2009.

9 This is about your role in determining British  
10 defence policy in Iraq from 2008 to 2009 and to ask how  
11 that policy was implemented. It focuses on the period  
12 leading up to the end of the UK combat mission in Iraq,  
13 the continued military presence after the end of the  
14 combat mission, on issues related to personnel, on the  
15 equipment and also to the continuation.

16 Now, I recognise -- we all recognise, that witnesses  
17 are giving evidence based in part on their recollection  
18 of events, and we, of course, cross-check what we hear  
19 against the papers that we have access to.

20 I remind every witness that they will later be asked  
21 to sign a transcript of their evidence to the effect  
22 that the evidence given is truthful, fair and accurate.

23 With that, and without delay, I'll turn to  
24 Sir Martin Gilbert to open the questions, Martin?

25 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Mr Hutton, when you took up office as

1 Secretary of State for Defence, the United Kingdom was  
2 engaged in two substantial military operations, one in  
3 Iraq, one in Afghanistan. Did the MoD have a sense of  
4 priorities between the two and was there any occasion  
5 during your time as Secretary of State for Defence that  
6 Iraq did not get the resources it needed because of  
7 Afghanistan?

8 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Well, answering the first half of  
9 that question first -- the last part first: no, we were  
10 certainly beginning to get more and more focused on the  
11 campaign in Afghanistan. There is no question at all  
12 about that, because the state of the military mission in  
13 Iraq had fundamentally changed during the course of the  
14 last 12 months, I think, before I became Secretary of  
15 State. The security environment in the south-east of  
16 Iraq had certainly become a very different one.

17 I think there was a sense that we had reached  
18 a tipping point in relation to the British military  
19 involvement in Iraq. The training of the Iraqi  
20 14th Division was progressing very well. We had  
21 excellent Iraqi commanders and excellent Iraqi troops  
22 coming through that mentoring and training function, and  
23 I think we were focused in relation to Iraq on making  
24 sure we completed our mission successfully, withdrew  
25 successfully and safely, and were able hand over to the

1           Iraqis and the American forces coming into Basra  
2           a credible and safe secured position for them, and  
3           I think there was no sense in my time that the MoD --  
4           that we were anything other than focused on completing  
5           the mission successfully, but certainly the conflict in  
6           Afghanistan was becoming more and more the focus of the  
7           effort in relation to current operations.

8   SIR MARTIN GILBERT: In terms of resources, not, you said,  
9           being affected by it?

10   RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Well, I don't think resources were  
11           the issue. Whatever the forces needed in Iraq, they  
12           were going to get. That was my job; to make sure they  
13           got whatever they needed. I don't think there was any  
14           time that I was aware of where there was anything other  
15           than a complete sort of focus on that issue. Whatever  
16           we needed for our guys there, they were going to get,  
17           and we were going to try to make sure they completed  
18           their mission as safely as possible. That was never in  
19           any doubt.

20   SIR MARTIN GILBERT: In July 2008, the Prime Minister had  
21           laid down the three remaining military tasks for the UK  
22           in the south. One was the training and the monitoring  
23           of the 14 Division, which you mentioned, and the other  
24           was to hand over Basra airport to Iraqi control, and the  
25           third was to develop the capacity of the Iraqi Navy and

1 Marines. Could you tell us what progress had been made  
2 on those tasks by the time you took office?

3 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Well, when I took office in October,  
4 the work on transferring Basra International Airport was  
5 very well advanced and that went very smoothly.

6 I think, the end of December, the airport was  
7 transferred to full Iraqi control, although they had  
8 been very heavily involved in the business at the  
9 airport for some time before that. I don't think there  
10 was any question that transfer of authority didn't go  
11 smoothly and successfully.

12 The training and mentoring of the 14th Division was  
13 well advanced, but they weren't quite in a position yet,  
14 at that point, to take over full security responsibility  
15 for the province, which was the last one in the  
16 south-east that was -- well, we were about to transfer  
17 to PIC the other three. But it was, I think that part  
18 of the south-east, the Multi-National Division area  
19 that, still required a little bit more effort and input  
20 from our side.

21 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Who had made the assessment that the  
22 Iraqi 14th Division was ready to be -- take command and  
23 control?

24 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: We obviously had our own view about  
25 that and I think that was the principle source of advice

1 that I was prepared to act on. But all of my military  
2 advisers were very confident that that work was going  
3 pretty well and they were very confident that within  
4 a very short period of time the Iraqi 14th Division  
5 would be fully capable of taking on the responsibility  
6 for planning as well as conducting operations.

7 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: You visited Basra yourself  
8 in October 2008. What were your impressions on your  
9 visit of the security situation there?

10 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: As I said in my opening remarks,  
11 Sir Martin, clearly the situation was changing pretty  
12 rapidly. It had certainly dramatically improved in the  
13 preceding few months after Charge of the Knights.

14 I think all of the atmospherics that were reported  
15 to me prior to my visit and were confirmed during my  
16 visit were that progress was very good. I used the  
17 expression earlier that we had sort of crossed a tipping  
18 point in relation to the security situation in the  
19 south.

20 I came away from Basra firmly believing that; that  
21 the situation had turned a very important corner. There  
22 were clearly risks that things could deteriorate. The  
23 political situation, for example, was still a little  
24 volatile, but I think the growing capability of the  
25 Iraqi security forces was apparent to everyone and there

1 was a sense within the city of a -- I wouldn't say of  
2 a normality returning, not completely normal, but it was  
3 a much quieter environment. There were very few  
4 security incidents involving British forces. An  
5 occasional rocket would come over the wall of the COB,  
6 but we were not the target of sustained violence from  
7 terrorists or extremist groups.

8 That period had ended, and we were now looking  
9 forwards, very much so, at that time, to the end of the  
10 year when full provincial Iraqi control could be handed  
11 over to the Iraqis.

12 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Your personal impressions. How easily  
13 were you able to, for example, move around Basra?

14 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I made two visits to Basra. I went  
15 in October and I went later in April. In October, they  
16 took me into one of the large open markets in Basra and  
17 there was a lot of nervousness. I didn't realise at the  
18 time that there was. I mean, I was wearing body armour  
19 and a helmet. I took it off and they wanted me to take  
20 it off and I was happy to take it off. I think that  
21 caused some alarm, but, as I say, I wasn't fully aware  
22 of that.

23 The second time there was never any doubt. We were  
24 walking around in shirt sleeves and there was no hint of  
25 any menace in the air at all. I didn't detect that

1           either, I have to say, in October. The atmosphere was  
2           pretty good and the Iraqis were very confident and  
3           I took a lot of comfort from that.

4   SIR MARTIN GILBERT: What impression did you get, both on  
5           your visits and also in the actual dealings with Iraq,  
6           of the co-ordination and relationship between our  
7           officials, the British officials, military and civilian  
8           and the Iraqis?

9   RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Those relationships were very good  
10          and very professional. I think the relationships that  
11          we had developed, to which I pay a lot of credit to  
12          General Salmon, whom I think was an inspirational leader  
13          of the Multi-National Division there. He did an  
14          outstanding job. The relationships that we had  
15          developed there, particularly with General Aziz and  
16          General Mohammed, were extraordinary. These were very  
17          close, professional, working relationships where we  
18          respected the capabilities and the professionalism of  
19          the Iraqi forces, which was very clear.

20          Of course, in the context of that mission, the one  
21          thing we wanted to see was that growing capability and  
22          confidence to take on the security role. That's  
23          a fundamental function of national sovereignty, and it  
24          was coming back to the Iraqis and that was the -- you  
25          know, it was something that we all drew a lot of

1 satisfaction from, and it didn't, in my view, and in my  
2 experience, and according to the advice I received, ever  
3 generate any tensions between the British forces and the  
4 Iraqi forces. The level of cooperation was remarkably  
5 close, and I did actually, during my time, go out and  
6 see one of the mentoring teams -- I think it was the  
7 Black Watch -- who were working with one of the Iraqi  
8 brigades.

9 Even then, at that level, the respect and support  
10 for each other, the British and Iraqis, was very obvious  
11 to me.

12 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: In your October visit, I believe you  
13 met with Prime Minister Maliki. What did he explain to  
14 you he wanted the UK's contribution in Iraq to be?

15 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: He was very supportive. He was  
16 clear with me that he wanted there to be an ongoing  
17 agreement between the UK and the Government of Iraq once  
18 the UN Security Council 1790 Resolution lapsed at the  
19 end of December, and, after my visit, we stepped up  
20 a lot of the preparations, the negotiations with the  
21 Iraqis to conclude such an agreement in time, and we  
22 wanted it to be concluded in time, we didn't want it to  
23 be an 11th hour job.

24 At that point, the Iraqis were still very heavily  
25 involved in negotiating, I think what we can probably

1 describe as the principal agreement with the  
2 United States, because the United States --

3 THE CHAIRMAN: I'm sorry, could we try and slow the pace  
4 a little?

5 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I'm sorry. I thought I was going  
6 slowly.

7 The principal Iraqi focus was getting the agreement  
8 fixed up with the Americans, who were, after all, still  
9 discharging very important security functions across  
10 Iraq. We were in a slightly different position, but it  
11 did actually go to the 11th hour, I am afraid,  
12 inevitably, but it -- and there were a number of periods  
13 during that time when we thought, "Are we going to get  
14 there or not?" and there were differences, I think,  
15 within the Iraqi Government, about precisely what role  
16 the British armed forces would play after the end of the  
17 UN Security Council Resolution.

18 We wanted a proper agreement that would give us  
19 adequate protection from any unfortunate cases where the  
20 Iraqis might want to exert criminal jurisdiction and  
21 authority over the behaviour of British forces. We,  
22 obviously, didn't want that.

23 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: A wider issue -- and I think this will  
24 be my last question before I hand over to my  
25 colleagues -- relates to both Prime Minister Maliki and

1 also our general policy with regard to the UK's policy  
2 in Iraq as a whole, what he saw our role would be in  
3 Iraq as a whole and what we saw it would be.

4 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think there was a general coming  
5 together of views between Prime Minister Maliki and the  
6 British Government about Britain's future role in Iraq.  
7 I think the frustrating thing was it took so long to  
8 actually formally get that agreed, and there were, as  
9 I said, differences within the Iraqi Council of  
10 Ministers, and certainly differences within the Council  
11 of Representatives, about what the ongoing British role  
12 would be.

13 I think it is fair to say we both took the view that  
14 our role would be essentially a training role after the  
15 end of the UN Security Council Resolution, but the  
16 training role, which I think you have heard from other  
17 witnesses, did involve British forces and could involve  
18 British forces in some active combat situations, and  
19 that was certainly true with the mentoring, the training  
20 teams, that we were still deploying in Iraq.

21 So we had to have a proper combat authorisation from  
22 the Iraqis post-31 December. I mean, it was fixing and  
23 finalising the terms of that agreement that led to this  
24 agreement going right to actually the 13th hour -- it  
25 wasn't the 11th hour, it was about half an hour before

1 the Security Council Resolution elapsed. So it was  
2 a fraught negotiation, but frustratingly so, because we  
3 were actually of the same mind about what the role of  
4 the British forces should be.

5 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Were we offering UK-based training to  
6 their forces?

7 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Yes, that was part of the  
8 understanding, yes. But the majority of the training  
9 would be in Iraq. I think we were looking at the  
10 prospect of Iraqi officer cadets training in the UK or  
11 doing some of their training in the UK, but I am afraid  
12 I have to say I can't remember the precise details of  
13 that, but it would be true to say that the vast majority  
14 of the training would be in Iraq and particularly  
15 focused on the Iraqi Navy.

16 THE CHAIRMAN: I think we might go back briefly to the  
17 drawdown situation. Lawrence?

18 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Yes, just very quickly on the  
19 drawdown, to make sure I have got the chronology right,  
20 the Prime Minister had announced in July 2008 the  
21 remaining tasks for completion and said there would be  
22 a fundamental change of mission in the first months of  
23 2009, but he hadn't said when the combat mission would  
24 end, and he didn't talk about dates for leaving until  
25 17 December, and then announced, during the visit to

1 Iraq, that British combat operations would be completed  
2 by 31 May 2009 and nearly all British forces would be  
3 withdrawn by July 2009.

4 Can you just take us through how this decision was  
5 taken and what were the sort of key factors in deciding  
6 on that time?

7 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think the key issue was our  
8 confidence at the progress of training of the Iraqi  
9 14th Division. We were expecting the training to be  
10 complete by that time and we felt it was important for  
11 the British public to understand that that would be the  
12 moment when combat missions would end.

13 But, as it turned out, as I'm sure the Committee is  
14 aware, the mission was completed a month early, at the  
15 end of April.

16 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: How were American considerations in  
17 this review -- there is a big election campaign going on  
18 in the United States, where Iraq is an issue. Was it  
19 thought sensible to wait until the election campaign was  
20 over before we made a statement of this sort?

21 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Well, I think the statement had been  
22 very carefully sort of choreographed with the  
23 US administration. We were obviously very concerned to  
24 make sure that we didn't do anything or say anything  
25 that would compromise the security of coalition forces

1 or Iraqi security forces. I think the announcement was  
2 made at a point where everyone was content that that was  
3 the right moment.

4 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: That was the only factor in relation  
5 with the Americans?

6 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think there were a number of  
7 factors. I mean, we didn't want to let our coalition  
8 allies down in any way. We had both been through  
9 a gruelling, very difficult campaign, with lots of  
10 casualties on all sides, and they are, and remain, our  
11 principal international security partner.

12 So I think it was right and proper for the  
13 announcement to be sort of organised in the way that it  
14 was and timed in a way that everyone felt comfortable  
15 with.

16 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So -- and there weren't any major  
17 issues with the Americans on the timing or --

18 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Not to my knowledge. When I went to  
19 Baghdad in October, I met with General Odierno, who had  
20 assumed command of the coalition forces there, and  
21 discussed with him and my officials the plans for the  
22 British withdrawal.

23 My advice all along, and, having gone back through  
24 the papers in the last few weeks confirms this, that at  
25 no point did the American administration, the American

1 forces, ever express any concern to us about the  
2 drawdown plans or the way they were being managed.  
3 I think they were developed and implemented very  
4 carefully in cooperation with our American allies.

5 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you.

6 THE CHAIRMAN: Let's change the theme a bit.

7 Baroness Prashar would like to ask some questions,  
8 I think.

9 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you very much indeed.

10 Mr Hutton, mounting two military operations  
11 simultaneously, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, created  
12 a potential level of stress and strain on the armed  
13 forces and their families, and I think you said as much  
14 in January 2009.

15 From your point of view, what were these strains and  
16 stresses?

17 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: The military, quite rightly, always  
18 looks to make sure there is a proper balance between  
19 periods of time when uniformed service personnel are  
20 engaged in active operations and when they can do the  
21 other things that soldiers, sailors and airmen need to  
22 do to remain at the top of their game. So there is  
23 a requirement for training, learning about new equipment  
24 and so on, and there are other roles, of course, that  
25 the military perform from time to time.

1           Now, we have a deal with the military that -- the  
2           so-called rule of five, that, you know, there will only  
3           be one period of regular active service over a fixed  
4           duration, and of course, the more periods -- the more  
5           active operations you are committed to, the harder it is  
6           to honour that deal, and there were certainly some  
7           units, some of the more specialist military units, where  
8           we weren't honouring the deal.

9           One of the things you have always got to try and  
10          balance out, first and foremost come the security  
11          requirements of the country and I would argue very  
12          strongly that the security requirements of the country  
13          needed us to be in Iraq and Afghanistan to the extent  
14          that we were, but you have also got to try and balance  
15          that with your commitments to those who serve the  
16          country in uniform and there is no doubt at all that  
17          that was getting harder and harder to do, and more so as  
18          the operation in Afghanistan was beginning to wrap up.

19        BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: In July 2005<sup>1</sup>, the Public Accounts  
20        Committee reported, and the Ministry of Defence  
21        accepted, that the armed forces were significantly  
22        stretched, but I think they did not consider they were  
23        overstretched. What's the difference between  
24        "significantly stretched" and "overstretched"?

25        RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think you had probably better ask

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<sup>1</sup> The Public Accounts Committee report referred to by Baroness Prashar was published in 2007 and not 2005.

1           them about it, but I would say I think the real crux of  
2           this is whether the military are able to perform safely  
3           and adequately the missions that we give them.

4           If they are not able to do that, then, in my view,  
5           they are overstretched. If they are still able to  
6           perform the mission, despite the strains that they are  
7           under, they are not overstretched. But, as I said, the  
8           responsibility of ministers, of government, of  
9           Parliament, is to make sure that, you know, we pose the  
10          least strain and stress we can on the service personnel  
11          and their families that is consistent with the  
12          requirements of security for the nation, and we  
13          struggled very, very hard to try and balance those two  
14          things out.

15   BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: You struggled hard to balance this  
16          and, as you rightly say, security is actually paramount  
17          but Sir Jock Stirrup, I think in October 2008, said  
18          that:

19                 "The British armed forces are stretched and we are  
20          doing more than we are structured to do in the  
21          long-term, and it is crucial that we reduce the  
22          operational tempo of our armed forces."

23                 Did he convey that message to you? Did you agree?

24                 Did he discuss that with the Prime Minister?

25   RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think we all agreed on that.

1 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: How did you respond? What was done  
2 about it?

3 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Quite a lot. We came out of Iraq  
4 about six months later, and I think that will in future  
5 allow us to develop the right force levels we need in  
6 Afghanistan.

7 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: From your point of view, what needed  
8 to happen to reduce the strain and what advice were you  
9 taking on the issues, and what advice were you getting  
10 from the defence chiefs?

11 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Well, I think the position that we  
12 had got to by early October, when I became the Secretary  
13 of State, was that everyone was clear about how this  
14 operational tempo was going to be reduced.

15 So there was an agreement between the politicians  
16 and the military about the course of action we should  
17 take to reduce that operational tempo. It was there for  
18 everybody to see. The Prime Minister had talked about  
19 combat mission in Iraq ending by the end of May. We  
20 actually ended it earlier.

21 I think against the backdrop of what was then  
22 clearly the plan that we had set out, I wasn't receiving  
23 any advice from Sir Jock Stirrup or anybody else to do  
24 more than we had signed up to do to reduce the  
25 operational tempo. There was a sense that, after the

1 end of combat missions in Iraq, we would be able to  
2 restore a better operational tempo. So the focus was on  
3 completing the mission.

4 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you were aware of it and there  
5 was a view that, if you completed the mission in Iraq,  
6 you would be able to turn your attention to reducing the  
7 tempo and restructuring?

8 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Yes, undoubtedly. We had to  
9 maintain for a period of time sufficient forces,  
10 configured in the right way, with the right elements,  
11 two significant combat brigades, one for Iraq and one  
12 for Afghanistan, and there is no doubt at all, with the  
13 resources that we had, that was very much at the limit  
14 of what we could do.

15 I think the sense was that we couldn't do that  
16 indefinitely. I think that was common knowledge.  
17 I certainly didn't challenge that or dispute that.  
18 I was just self-evident. But as I said, once we had  
19 agreed how we would withdraw from Iraq, the conditions  
20 and the timetable and so on, as I said,  
21 Baroness Prashar, I wasn't -- ministers weren't getting  
22 any advice to go further than the timescale and the  
23 arrangements that we had set up.

24 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But you would agree that this  
25 relentless pressure on the base of operation did have an

1 impact on the soldiers and their families?

2 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think the environment in which  
3 they were serving had the impact. It is tough, you  
4 know, you are under fire. Your families are worried  
5 about you. Yes, that creates the tension and the  
6 stress.

7 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you.

8 THE CHAIRMAN: Just for the record, I'm not sure whether we  
9 caught exactly the right reference to the PAC report.  
10 I think it was 2007, not 2005.

11 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I'm sorry.

12 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Lawrence?

13 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I would like to ask you a couple of  
14 questions. You are right at the end of what has been  
15 a long and, as you have indicated, difficult campaign,  
16 and we have discussed with Mr Hoon how, when the  
17 campaign started, it was necessary to rely a lot on  
18 urgent operational requirements to make up for  
19 shortfalls that inevitably, perhaps, but certainly in  
20 the situation in 2003, were not there in terms of the  
21 stocks developed in the defence budget. But we are now  
22 sort of six years on.

23 Did it surprise you that there was still so many key  
24 items of equipment that hadn't come through the system  
25 so that our forces were still wanting -- I'm obviously

1 thinking of helicopters, but it wasn't just helicopters.

2 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: What I saw, when I went into the  
3 MoD, was the amount of effort that had been put in to  
4 fix some of these problems, which I know have been well  
5 catalogued, and, as a result of that effort over several  
6 years, there is no doubt at all in my mind -- and this  
7 was one of the first things I was told when I went Iraq  
8 and Afghanistan, was how much better the equipment and  
9 kit that our guys had compared to two or three years  
10 before.

11 There was no doubt at all that we had been on  
12 a journey, a difficult journey. We are not through it  
13 yet, in my view, but we had been on a journey of  
14 discovery where we had tried to apply as quickly as  
15 possible the lessons of those two conflicts, and I think  
16 we have done that very successfully, both in terms of  
17 the personal protection for our troops, vehicles, body  
18 armour, helmets and so on, and also the fire power which  
19 they have at their disposal now and which has  
20 dramatically increased in recent years.

21 I think the fundamental problem for the MoD is this,  
22 and it is one that I think affects every country and  
23 certainly it has affected every coalition partner in  
24 Iraq, and that is predicting the nature of future  
25 conflict. You can't do that, I think, with 100 per cent

1           prescience. It is not an exact science.

2           Did we get every bit of that calculation right? No,  
3           we didn't. Quite clearly, we didn't. But I think first  
4           and foremost came the consideration, "Is it in Britain's  
5           vital security interests to be there in Iraq?" and the  
6           answer to that question was "Yes".

7           In the meantime, we have acquired new kit and new  
8           capability, for sure, but, Sir Lawrence, you are  
9           the pre-eminent military historian here. I suspect --  
10          this is just my view -- that I don't think any country  
11          at any time in history has started any military campaign  
12          with all of the kit and equipment it needed to fight and  
13          deal with every contingency that it was likely to face.  
14          That is simply never practical, I think, or possible.

15          The question is: how quickly do you get to that  
16          point, where you have got better kit and better  
17          capabilities? And I think we have done that pretty  
18          well.

19       SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think the question -- all military  
20       campaigns are improvised to start with, to a degree, and  
21       I think that's understood, but, as I said, we are now  
22       a long way down the road, and while it may be the case  
23       that there is a degree of uncertainty about the  
24       operations that you might find yourself in, again,  
25       coming back to helicopters, it has been a long time

1 since somebody, a military commander, said they needed  
2 fewer helicopters. It is always a demand.

3 What's your explanation of why we still find  
4 ourselves, just to quote Sir Richard Dannatt in  
5 January 2009, when he said the military were still  
6 a long way from having the number of helicopters they  
7 needed? What's your explanation of why it had taken us  
8 so long to get round this problem?

9 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think you have heard this from  
10 other witnesses as well. Buying helicopters doesn't  
11 take that much time. Getting them fitted out for  
12 particular theatres can take some time. Training air  
13 crew can take even longer.

14 This is not a capability you can simply buy one day,  
15 and then, the next day, you've got it. It is simply not  
16 like that. I think the other thing I would say is that,  
17 of course, in both of these campaigns, but particularly  
18 Iraq -- and I know that, obviously, is the focus of this  
19 Inquiry -- were coalition campaigns. We had some assets  
20 that we made available to our coalition partners, they  
21 had other assets they made available to us.

22 We were never likely to ever have sufficient  
23 resources to have as much kit and equipment as the  
24 Americans have, for example, that is simply unrealistic,  
25 and I think there has been a very steady increase in the

1 number of helicopters that we have had available and the  
2 hours that they fly, which is the other very important  
3 thing. The number of air frames is critical, of course,  
4 but so, too, is their reliability requirement. How many  
5 flying hours can you extract from each of those air  
6 frames? And that has increased as well. So I think we  
7 have made steady progress in those -- both those  
8 campaigns.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But we were still reliant -- or you  
10 were still coping, even in 2009, with the consequences  
11 of decisions taken a number of years earlier, because,  
12 as you say, that's the lead times that are required. So  
13 unless things are taken, decisions are taken, pretty  
14 quickly, then four/five years down the line, the problem  
15 is still likely to be facing our troops.

16 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: The issue of helicopters undoubtedly  
17 was a factor in the campaign, and I don't think there is  
18 any point in pretending otherwise, and you are right,  
19 the military would certainly have liked more helicopters  
20 and I think the politicians would have liked to have  
21 made them available, and did over a number of years make  
22 more helicopter hours available, but again, I'm sure you  
23 have heard this from other witnesses, helicopters are  
24 a critical part of the logistical infrastructure, but  
25 there are other equally important things that had to be

1 addressed as well.

2 I think we heard from Des Browne a minute ago, very  
3 rightly saying that in a campaign like this your forces  
4 can't just be up in the air, they have to be on the  
5 ground and sometimes they have no move on the ground,  
6 not withstanding the risk that that presented in  
7 a campaign that had become typified by asymmetric  
8 roadside bomb blasts and so on. Because your ability to  
9 transport troops -- you have to move them on the  
10 ground -- is a demonstration to the population of your  
11 intent to protect them from harm. You cannot always do  
12 that if you are moving troops around --

13 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: There was a problem there, too,  
14 wasn't there, with the Future Rapid Effect System, which  
15 is a fancy name for the new armoured vehicle which  
16 I think the procurement of that was described as  
17 a fiasco?

18 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think it is hard to imagine  
19 a worse procurement shambles than the Future Rapid  
20 Effect System, yes, and I agree, if we had had progress  
21 made on the original timescale for that, some of that  
22 equipment and kit would have been available to our  
23 troops in Iraq, and certainly in Afghanistan, and we  
24 have tried to make good the shortfall by the urgent  
25 operational requirement programme, which has certainly

1 produced much better quality, better protected vehicles  
2 but I'm afraid to say they still would not have been of  
3 the same level of protection as the Future Rapid Effect  
4 System vehicles.

5 So that is, I think, a pretty grim episode, and in  
6 my view makes the case for a very urgent reform and  
7 shake-up of the equipment procurement function of the  
8 Ministry of Defence absolutely essential. We can't wind  
9 back time, we can't solve this problem, but if you are  
10 asking me about equipment and how governments prepare,  
11 we must learn the lesson of that.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: What do you say is the major lesson  
13 of the FRES programme?

14 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: How long have we got?

15 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Not a lot, but give us two or three  
16 highlights.

17 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: We couldn't settle on the  
18 specification. We changed our mind about certain aspects  
19 of how we wanted to go ahead with the procurement.  
20 We started, we stopped. There needs to be much greater  
21 clarity, I'm afraid, about equipment specification.  
22 I think sometimes we should be prepared to go off the  
23 shelf and buy and build up a capability from the existing  
24 platform rather than reinvent the wheel, which I am  
25 afraid we may have attempted with FRES.

1           People will long argue about the Future Rapid Effect  
2           programme, but one thing, I am afraid, the one fact  
3           people can't argue with is that ten years into it, we  
4           still haven't got a single vehicle.

5   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just go back slowly over the point  
6           you were making, which is an important point, about ten  
7           years past. It is an important point.

8   RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: It is very important.

9   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So you are basically saying that  
10           this has been going on for ten years and you describe  
11           this process of not settling on a specification.

12           Is part of the problem that too many people have  
13           a chance during the course of a procurement programme to  
14           interfere with the specifications and challenge them in  
15           some particular way?

16   RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Yes.

17   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So we need something more  
18           streamlined?

19   RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Certainly.

20   THE CHAIRMAN: Right.

21   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I had better stop with that.

22   THE CHAIRMAN: I'll turn to Sir Roderic Lyne now for what is  
23           probably the last line of questions in this session.  
24           Roderic?

25   SIR RODERIC LYNE: Towards the time when we withdrew our

1 combat mission from Iraq, which was the end of April  
2 last year, we negotiated arrangements with the  
3 Iraqi Government for our continuing defence relationship  
4 with them, including the areas in which our forces would  
5 continue to be involved in Iraq or offshore Iraq.

6 Iraq is self-evidently a country of enormous  
7 strategic importance. I don't think we really need to  
8 spell out again why. How important is that defence  
9 relationship and our continuing military presence to the  
10 UK in pursuit of our strategic interest, looking into  
11 the future, not only in Iraq but in the region?

12 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think the relationship is  
13 fundamentally important to us for all sorts of reasons,  
14 and we are right, in my view, to invest in maintaining  
15 and preserving that relationship. I think Iraq is a new  
16 democracy, hopefully, although we are not there yet,  
17 largely at peace with itself, certainly no longer  
18 a threat to its neighbours. Given its enormous wealth  
19 and richness in energy resources, we do have  
20 a fundamental interest in making sure there is an  
21 unitary democratic, stable Iraq.

22 I think the area where we can certainly help improve  
23 Iraqi security, and, therefore, indirectly our own, is  
24 around the role of the Iraqi Navy. I think some of the  
25 most important offshore oil installations that Iraq has

1 are in disputed territorial waters. Iran is not  
2 a helpful, friendly neighbour. Iran remains, in my  
3 view, the biggest single threat now to regional  
4 instability in the most volatile part of the world, and  
5 the Iraqi Navy still is significantly short of important  
6 equipment and capability.

7 So if we want to be a strategic partner for the new  
8 democratic Iraq, which I hope very much we will continue  
9 to be, this is the area where we can make our own unique  
10 contribution. That is accepted, I think, across the  
11 coalition, and the Iraqi Navy and Royal Navy have  
12 historically very close links, which -- both in terms of  
13 relations, personal relationships, and history and  
14 tradition. So we should play to our strengths and that  
15 is certainly one.

16 SIR RODERIC LYNE: I think if you got Sir Martin Gilbert on  
17 to that subject, he could see take you back 200 years on  
18 the Naval relationship.

19 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I would like to hear that.

20 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Iran, you say, is not a friendly  
21 neighbour, but that depends who you are in Iraq and  
22 obviously Iran had very close relationships with some  
23 elements in Iraq, played on those relationships and to  
24 some extent must be considered as an alternative pole of  
25 attraction to the coalition powers, at least to some

1 people in Iraq.

2 Are you worried that the Iranians over time will  
3 actually succeed in undermining the position that the  
4 coalition has established as a partner of the new Iraq,  
5 if I can call it such?

6 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think the biggest fear that I have  
7 is of sectarianism and I think that is the greatest  
8 threat to the stability of the Iraqi democracy and  
9 I think it is the threat of sectarianism in Iraq which  
10 I associate with Iranian influence. So that is  
11 something, yes, we have got to guard against, all of us,  
12 and I think that is something that the Iraqi Government  
13 itself is very aware of.

14 I think the thing that has transformed the prospects  
15 for Iraq in the last two or three years has been the  
16 accommodation between Sunni and Shia in Iraq. Those who  
17 would like to damage that accommodation are those whom  
18 we should be most worried about.

19 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Some of the witnesses we have had have  
20 certainly emphasised how fragile the present political  
21 arrangements inside Iraq are, even though they are  
22 obviously in a much improved situation compared with  
23 a few years ago, and you, yourself, have sounded  
24 slightly cautious in your optimism. How big a risk do  
25 you see that these fragile arrangements may break down

1 and this investment that we have made may turn into  
2 nought?

3 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think there is a risk there of  
4 that. But these are ultimately matters now that the  
5 Iraqis and Iraqi politicians and political parties have  
6 to address as part of the growth of Iraqi democracy. So  
7 I think there is a risk. I think it is a small risk and  
8 much smaller than it has been at any time since 2003  
9 that that would happen, but I think it is something that  
10 has to be guarded against.

11 What is obvious is Al-Qaeda are still present and  
12 still active. That has to be fought, the Al-Qaeda  
13 influence is a profoundly evil influence in Iraq as it  
14 is everywhere else. I detect very obvious willingness  
15 on the part of the Iraqi security forces to target  
16 Al-Qaeda and that must happen if Iraq is ever going to  
17 enjoy peace and stability, but I think the whole point  
18 now is that it is in their hands. It is in Iraqi hands,  
19 as it should be.

20 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Albeit with active offers of assistance  
21 from the United States and ourselves, at the time you  
22 left office, how much influence did you feel the  
23 British Government was able to exercise in Baghdad over  
24 the direction of Iraqi policy and Iraqi politics?

25 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think as part of the coalition the

1 influence is still strong and positive, but, inevitably,  
2 now at this point in the development of the new  
3 democratic Iraq, the Iraqi democratic institutions have  
4 the freedom and the power to go their own way. That is  
5 a fundamental attribute of statehood. It is what this  
6 campaign ultimately was designed to restore to Iraq.

7 So you know, this is a tension between, if you like,  
8 where we are, where the coalition is, where the Iraqis  
9 are, but it is entirely healthy, democratic tension, and  
10 I think the influence of the British in Iraq can still  
11 be very positive, and not just in security terms, where  
12 I would accept that our contribution is much more  
13 limited than, for example, to the United States and in  
14 fact has been much more limited all the way through this  
15 campaign, but in areas of trade.

16 I think the United Kingdom can develop very  
17 important and helpful relationships with Iraq and we  
18 have expertise and certainly very critical sectors, like  
19 energy, oil and gas, which really can be of benefit to  
20 the long-term development of Iraq, and that is certainly  
21 recognised by the Iraqis and, you know, I'm very pleased  
22 to say that the government is making a big effort in  
23 improving and developing trade relationships because  
24 that is, you know, what democracies do with each other.

25 SIR RODERIC LYNE: My final question, if in the widest

1 possible sense we cast our minds back to 2003, before  
2 the conflict, and we recall the strategic objectives  
3 that at the time the British Government was putting  
4 forward for its participation in this coalition, which  
5 went beyond Iraq, they were related also to the region,  
6 they were also expressed in terms of international  
7 terrorism and combating it. To what extent did you  
8 feel, when we concluded our combat mission that we had  
9 achieved those strategic objectives?

10 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I feel we have achieved those  
11 strategic objectives. There will be many people who  
12 will disagree with that and they will point to the  
13 disastrous losses -- loss of human life, damage to  
14 property and infrastructure that has taken place in the  
15 last six years in Iraq, as evidence that it was not  
16 worthwhile. People will come to their own judgments  
17 about that, but my view is that -- I was trying to say  
18 this earlier, that Iraq now is a democracy that is  
19 emerging from, you know, a generation of fascism and  
20 extremism, of promoting and sponsoring terrorism across  
21 the region, a country that invaded most of its  
22 neighbours, massacred hundreds of thousands of its own  
23 people. Iraq is a different country now.

24 We are, I think -- I hope -- as a result of all the  
25 service and sacrifice of British, coalition and Iraqi

1 service personnel, now in a position where we can say  
2 that Iraq has a future as a fully integrated member of  
3 the international community, not a pariah, not a threat  
4 to its neighbours or to its own people, but a nation  
5 like us, a democracy, that can get on with people and  
6 find a role for itself in the world.

7 That would not have happened if it had not been for  
8 the decision the coalition made to intervene to end the  
9 defiance of the United Nations and the oppression of its  
10 own people.

11 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you for that. I was about to move into  
12 final questions and so on, but I would like to pick up  
13 something that your predecessor Des Browne said earlier  
14 this afternoon.

15 We were talking, towards the end of his evidence,  
16 about the future strategic defence review and he said in  
17 effect we are already approaching the foothills of it,  
18 and I wondered, from your nine months when you were  
19 working with and seeing at very close quarters the UK's  
20 whole Ministry of Defence military machinery -- and  
21 machinery is the wrong metaphor, it is people -- at work  
22 and in action, are you confident that there is  
23 sufficient openness to lessons, sometimes painful ones  
24 that the adjustments that are going to be necessary,  
25 despite interservice strains, competitiveness,

1 readjustment of our national situation in the wider  
2 world, is that machine going to produce the goods in  
3 a future SDR?

4 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: It has to, because a lot depends on  
5 doing that. I think the one thing that always impressed  
6 me about the British military -- and there are many  
7 things to be impressed about -- was their sort of  
8 ability to be self-critical and I think that is a very,  
9 very important -- you know, we are conducting highly  
10 difficult operations in complicated environments, where  
11 the fundamental purpose is to protect the public,  
12 protect the people of those communities, from extremism  
13 and extremist violence. It is not like tackling another  
14 army. There is territory to be had and front lines to  
15 be advanced and so on. These are very different  
16 campaigns.

17 I think we have shown a willingness to adapt and  
18 adjust. I think, however, the strategic defence review  
19 faces some very difficult challenges. If there is one  
20 thing I take out of all of this it is that the British  
21 armed forces, like those of our coalition allies, need  
22 not just the ability on occasions -- and let's hope and  
23 pray they are not very many, but on occasions we need  
24 the force to knock in the door, to knock down the door,  
25 but we need the ability then to rebuild the house, and

1 I think it is in that context that I think we have got  
2 more work to be done. We need different and new  
3 capabilities to allow us to do this type of role in the  
4 future. We are slowly acquiring those capabilities, but  
5 I think -- I don't know the numbers in Iraq, I'm sorry,  
6 Sir John, I should, but if you just look very briefly at  
7 Afghanistan, it has been easier, although it has been  
8 hard, for us to put 10,000 combat troops into  
9 Afghanistan than it has been to find 100 skilled  
10 civilians who can help us build the new economy of  
11 Afghanistan, and the same is true in Iraq.

12 We need the ability -- and I am afraid it can  
13 probably only come from the military -- we need the  
14 ability to stabilise, to reconstruct, and that can only  
15 be done by people in uniform, in my experience, and we  
16 don't yet have the full capability of doing that.

17 THE CHAIRMAN: Does that point in part to widening the scope  
18 of a strategic defence review unless defence itself  
19 takes on a much broader meaning, to include  
20 a comprehensive approach to reconstruction and nation  
21 building?

22 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: I think the terms of reference for  
23 the new SDR should be as broadly drafted as possible.

24 So I hope that is done, yes.

25 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Are there any other or different

1 final observations you would like to offer the Inquiry  
2 this afternoon, given that we, too, are a lessons  
3 learned enterprise?

4 RT HON JOHN HUTTON MP: Well, I'm worried about the  
5 stenographer. I don't want to put any more pressure on  
6 her. No, I think that is probably the most important  
7 lesson that I draw from the campaign in Iraq.

8 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much indeed for your evidence  
9 and thank you to everyone in the room who has been here  
10 throughout the afternoon.

11 That will close today's session, and, just to remind  
12 those who are interested, at 10 o'clock tomorrow  
13 morning, Tuesday, we shall be taking evidence from  
14 Sir Michael Wood, the chief legal adviser to the  
15 Foreign Office over much of the period, and from  
16 David Brummell, who was the legal adviser to the  
17 Ministry of Defence, and also, later, from  
18 Elizabeth Wilmshurst, the deputy adviser who resigned in  
19 2003, and in the last part of the afternoon and  
20 differently, Mrs Margaret Beckett will be giving  
21 evidence from her time as Foreign Secretary  
22 from May 2006 to June 2007.

23 I should I think have described David Brummell as  
24 legal secretary to the law office. I have muddled him  
25 up, sorry, and with that, close the day. Thank you all

1           very much, and thanks to Catherine.

2       (4.55 pm)

3           (The Inquiry adjourned until 10.00 am the following day)

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