

1 (3.30 pm)

2 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Good afternoon, Mrs Beckett.

4 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Good afternoon.

5 THE CHAIRMAN: Let's commence the last session of the day,
6 and at this session we are hearing from the
7 Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP. You, Mrs Beckett, were
8 Foreign Secretary from May 2006 until June 2007,
9 I think.

10 We would like to ask about the government's strategy
11 and objectives towards Iraq in those years. The
12 co-ordination of government policy on Iraq and the
13 United Kingdom's relationship with other countries, and,
14 in particular, with the Government of Iraq itself as
15 well as with other countries in the region and the
16 United States of America.

17 I say this on every occasion, so forgive the ritual:
18 we recognise that witnesses are giving evidence based in
19 part on their recollection of events. We are, of
20 course, checking what we hear against the papers to
21 which we have access and I remind every witness that
22 they will later be asked to sign a transcript of the
23 evidence to the effect that the evidence given is
24 truthful, fair and accurate.

25 With those preliminaries out of the way, perhaps

1 I could ask Sir Martin Gilbert to open the questions.

2 Martin?

3 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Ms Beckett, we would like to deepen our
4 understanding of the evolution of British policy from
5 your viewpoint as Foreign Secretary in 2006 and 2007.
6 Could you start by telling us what our strategy was in
7 Iraq when you took up your post in May 2006?

8 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Well, our strategy remained to
9 try to secure -- I mean, if I can take a step back for
10 one second, of course, the Prime Minister had quite
11 recently been appointed when I was appointed. So we
12 were still in the throes of seeing the new government
13 established, and what we wanted to see was a government
14 which was broadly based, representative, and would be
15 competent and effective and able to bring about recovery
16 and renewal in Iraq over time, and obviously with a lot
17 of help and support.

18 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: How far did the security situation
19 threaten these objectives or put them in a remote -- to
20 some remote time?

21 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I certainly think it made them
22 infinitely more difficult to achieve and obviously
23 slower to achieve. I would say those were the two key
24 things. There were perhaps moments when certainly
25 outside commentators wondered whether it made them

1 possible to achieve, but I think that the basic approach
2 that we had was that it was extremely important to
3 continue to try to secure those goals, that we would
4 hold our nerve, tack here and there, if you like, make
5 what adjustments we had to, but try not to lose sight of
6 that goal.

7 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: We heard from your Director (Iraq) in
8 the Foreign Office, John Jenkins, who stressed, when he
9 was talking to us, that he felt that the FCO policy at
10 that time was dominated by what he called crisis
11 management, because, effectively, of the security
12 situation, rather than thinking about long-term issues.
13 Is that a fair description, from your perspective?

14 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I'm not sure whether -- I mean,
15 I think Dominic Asquith had become the Director (Iraq)
16 at the time I was there. My memory may be at fault, but
17 tell me again what he said, because this is something
18 I didn't catch up with.

19 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: That essentially our thinking --

20 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Responding to events?

21 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: -- was dominated by crisis management
22 rather than long-term strategy.

23 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Well, I don't find that easy to
24 address in the sense that obviously the Director for
25 Iraq sees things day-to-day and more immediately,

1 I suppose, than the Foreign Secretary, who is dealing
2 with a whole lot of other things, but while, of course,
3 there was a need to deal with issues as they arose and
4 there was the occasional crisis to respond to, it didn't
5 seem to me that we were being diverted from our goal.
6 But perhaps things had settled down a bit by the time
7 that I became more engaged.

8 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: We wondered, with regard to your role
9 as Foreign Secretary, to what extent were the
10 Prime Minister's other sources of advice on Iraq, for
11 example, his foreign policy adviser at Number 10, how
12 did this affect your own judgment, your own pursual of
13 policy?

14 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: There was a very close
15 relationship and there were a lot of people who had been
16 engaged with all of this development of policy and this
17 handling of this area of policy for quite some
18 considerable time, and it seemed to me that there was
19 quite a close relationship between the different players
20 and an understanding of their different roles, and
21 Nigel Sheinwald, I presume you are referring to, I had,
22 myself, a good relationship with him and my impression
23 was that so did the office. No doubt there were
24 tensions from time to time, but that basically it was
25 a good working relationship.

1 I mean, this may be a moment to say, Sir John, that
2 of course, from my point of view in the early days of my
3 time in the office, the immediate priority, of course,
4 was Iran. I was appointed on the Friday, and on the
5 Monday I was in -- I can't remember whether it was
6 New York or Washington, talking about Iran, nuclear
7 negotiations.

8 So, for me, there were a whole lot of other things
9 going on which were requiring my attention, my very
10 close attention, and this was part of ongoing work that
11 was taking place in the background. I think it was
12 a few days -- I think it was 18 May -- before I had my
13 briefing about Iraq and about the ongoing developments
14 in Iraq.

15 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Sir Nigel Sheinwald has told us about
16 the work of what he called a fully constituted
17 Cabinet Committee, the DOP (Iraq), which existed with
18 the Prime Minister in the chair, and, indeed, with you,
19 as Foreign Secretary, as his deputy.

20 With regard to DOP (Iraq) and its work, did the
21 different departments represented have different agendas
22 with regard to Iraq at this time?

23 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Not particularly to my
24 recollection. I mean, they had their different
25 responsibilities, of course. So DFID, for example, was

1 particularly focused on what they could achieve and how
2 they could achieve it, and I think we will go on from
3 what Sir John said to the security situation, but there
4 came a point where they were anxious about their
5 capacity to do so, not because of their skills, because
6 of their people, which are substantial, but because of
7 the security situation.

8 So obviously, different departments had their
9 different worries and anxieties, but basically it seemed
10 to me that it was a team that was working well together.

11 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: That's very important, because we have
12 had evidence of the different problems, for example,
13 from the military and for DFID. So your conclusion is
14 that somehow these were able to to be resolved?

15 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Well, I think my own
16 recollection is that -- I'm drawing really on things
17 that I heard before I became Foreign Secretary. I think
18 there had been some tensions, some difficulty of getting
19 the balance of things right in the early days.

20 For my own part -- I'm drawing very heavily on
21 memory here because not all of the papers I have seen
22 are very illuminating on some of this, but certainly it
23 seemed to me that, whatever tensions there had been, by
24 the time that I was looking at the work of the PRT that
25 was being established and so on, were being resolved and

1 that people were -- obviously there was always the thing
2 I think -- some of the military have said -- I haven't
3 had a chance to look at all of the military evidence to
4 you. I know some of the military said that they felt
5 that they were dealing with some short-term projects,
6 but they didn't always feel that there was the DFID
7 involvement in some of the longer-term projects.

8 So I'm not denying at all that there were times when
9 there were tensions and difficulties, all I am saying is
10 that by the time I was involved, I felt that those had
11 either eased or were being resolved or were less of
12 a difficulty.

13 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: In October 2006, you decided to
14 withdraw most of the civilian staff from Basra. Can you
15 tell us whom you consulted before making this decision
16 and what the process of decision-making was?

17 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: From memory -- and this has to
18 be from memory, I am afraid. A lot of the diary papers
19 are long gone and are not available to me -- we had our
20 own internal advice and the relevant member of staff had
21 been out to Basra and taken a look at the situation and
22 had come back full of concerns. Concerns that were not
23 totally shared by the people on the ground, and -- well,
24 both in Basra and Baghdad, concerns about
25 a deteriorating security situation.

1 So Michael Jay came to see me and told me that he
2 was concerned about the welfare of staff and we had
3 quite a long conversation about it, and, of course, both
4 felt that this was absolutely paramount and that we had
5 to consider what we could and should do.

6 In the process of that consideration, obviously we
7 shared this with other government colleagues, other
8 government departments as relevant, but we also took
9 advice from the people on the ground as to what -- they
10 didn't take quite such a grim view of the situation.
11 They felt that there was still a good deal they could
12 contribute, that there were adjustments that they could
13 make, that the security situation could be improved and
14 they wanted to do that.

15 I might take this opportunity to say how incredibly
16 impressed I was by the -- the devotion to service and
17 the courage of staff who were all volunteers. I remember
18 someone actually went from my private office, who
19 I think had been Jack's social secretary, and the first
20 thing I heard was, "She won't be here long, she is going
21 to Basra". I thought, "I didn't think it was that bad
22 working for me".

23 But there were people who were -- who knew there was
24 an important job to do and wanted to do it and were
25 prepared to try, and they were not just going to give up

1 and go away because somebody said this is getting very
2 difficult.

3 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: What effect did the withdrawal of so
4 many have on our objectives?

5 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Well, the general impact of the
6 security situation reduced to a certain extent our
7 capacity to operate as we had been doing. It made
8 intelligence more difficult to gather. It made meetings
9 more difficult to have and so on, but it didn't
10 become -- we didn't feel that it was becoming impossible
11 for us to make a contribution, and so we were able to
12 continue, for example, with the very important work of
13 training and mentoring with the police and the DFID work
14 was able, some of it, to continue. We had a drawdown of
15 staff, but we, as I said, we held our nerve and we
16 continued to be able to operate.

17 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Can I turn now to --

18 THE CHAIRMAN: Sorry, Martin, could I interrupt? You said
19 something, Mrs Beckett, early on about the huge range
20 and scope of the duties of any Foreign Secretary,
21 including yourself.

22 I just wondered whether, with your eye on the whole
23 of the region in the larger sense, other events were
24 impacting on the way you viewed Iraq, either in priority
25 terms or otherwise. I mean, Lebanon is, in a way, a hot

1 spot at this time, for example, and that changes all the
2 relationships within the cluster.

3 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Indeed.

4 THE CHAIRMAN: It would be interesting to hear how that sort
5 of impacts on the view you take of one country, namely,
6 Iraq, where we are heavily involved?

7 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Certainly when I think back to
8 that period, it is Iran that comes first to mind because
9 of the immediacy of it and because of the intensity of
10 it. I mean, I can't trace it, but it must have been of
11 the order of a couple of weeks or so after I attended my
12 first meeting on Iran in the United States, I was asked
13 to chair the second meeting of what we would call the E3
14 plus 3 Russia, China, the United States, France, Germany
15 and ourselves in Vienna, and there was heavy and close
16 engagement.

17 I recall saying to people that I thought that
18 overall in my first six months in the job I had probably
19 had greater and much more intimate links with those half
20 a dozen -- five other colleagues than I probably would
21 have had in four years in the job under normal
22 circumstances, because we met fairly frequently and when
23 we met, we usually met either minister alone or minister
24 plus one. So it was very intensive, and then, as you
25 say, in what must have been July-ish, the trouble began

1 in the Middle East and the Lebanon war and that, again,
2 was very intensive engagement over quite a period,
3 during which time -- so part of my engagement with Iraqi
4 colleagues was getting to know them, giving them all the
5 encouragement and support that we could, but also
6 getting their assessment of the views and the
7 preoccupations of other players.

8 THE CHAIRMAN: Just one other thing, because I think it is
9 important for all of us to keep it in mind: you are also
10 paying a quite heavy price in terms of travel time for
11 all these meetings, aren't you?

12 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Oh, yes.

13 THE CHAIRMAN: And finding a resting place where you can
14 actually do all the reading and the thinking, not,
15 I imagine, easy, particularly in the circumstances you
16 faced in 2006.

17 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: That is certainly true.

18 Fortunately, I have always been someone who can read in
19 the car, which makes a huge difference, and, of course,
20 plane journeys. I think Douglas Hurd many years ago
21 said, "It was the only time the office couldn't get hold
22 of you".

23 Of course, that is no longer true, but I have always
24 found the office does not have the smallest difficulty
25 in filling every minute on the plane with papers that

1 you absolutely have to read before you get to the
2 meeting, and that's quite apart from background.

3 So, yes -- and, of course, one of the undercurrents
4 throughout this period was the Prime Minister had been
5 absolutely clear all the way through from right back in
6 the beginning of any of this, how crucial the
7 Middle East peace process was to everything else that
8 was going on and how important it was to try and get
9 movement on that and to try to get the Americans as much
10 engaged as President Bush famously said once in Northern
11 Ireland, as he had been in Northern Ireland. So there
12 was very much also a thread of that running through, and
13 as I went on in my time in the Foreign Office, the
14 Americans began to become more engaged.

15 So, yes, a huge amount of other preoccupations, and
16 in a sense, for me, Iraq was a continuing issue, rather
17 than the thing that was top of my agenda day on day.
18 I say with a slight tinge of regret that it would be
19 true almost to say that some of the themes that were put
20 to me in my first days in the job about the need to help
21 and encourage reconciliation among the different groups
22 in Iraq, the advantage of getting an oil law that was
23 not only sound for the economy but good for every
24 distribution and for the effects that would have,
25 de-Ba'athification --

1 THE CHAIRMAN: Or de-de-Ba'athification?

2 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Yes, de-de-Ba'athification.

3 The need to improve services. Those were themes when

4 I was first briefed about Iraq and they remained

5 continuing preoccupations and themes when I left.

6 Improved, but still there.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We would certainly like to pursue

8 reconciliation among others a bit later on, but you did

9 mention -- I think we will turn to Sir Martin in

10 a minute -- an interesting thing, which I think I

11 haven't heard before in these sessions, that you were

12 actually getting some input back from the Government of

13 Iraq, on their take on events in the region.

14 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Absolutely.

15 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: I want to turn now to our relations

16 with the Government of Iraq. Nouri Al-Maliki had become

17 Prime Minister shortly before you became Foreign

18 Secretary. By the time you became Foreign Secretary,

19 the United Kingdom had, of course, expended considerable

20 blood and treasure in Iraq.

21 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Indeed.

22 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Did our influence with the Maliki

23 government reflect this?

24 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Oh, yes, I think so. Now,

25 that's not to say, of course, that either they simply

1 did everything that we would have wished them to do or
2 that they did it in the way that we might have thought
3 that they would be able or ought to do it, but I always
4 felt there was a very good relationship, a good
5 relationship between our Prime Minister and the Iraqi
6 Prime Minister and Hoshyar Zebari, the Iraqi Foreign
7 Minister, who some of you may have met, is a man I think it
8 would be impossible to have a poor relationship with,
9 and everybody has a good relationship with Hoshyar, and
10 of course, I began to get to know some of the other
11 players as I went to Iraq and also as they came to
12 London and generally.

13 So, yes, I think there was a very good relationship,
14 but one of the things that actually is very much in my
15 mind and of which I was reminded looking at some of
16 these background papers, is how quickly -- and I think
17 personally this is an extremely good thing -- but how
18 quickly Iraq, once having got this elected government
19 and its ministers in place, they wished to take
20 responsibility themselves and to have their input and
21 began to say more and more, "Yes, well, we know you want
22 to do this, but actually we think we may know better how
23 to do it".

24 Now, we didn't always end up agreeing about that,
25 but I thought the thing that may have -- it certainly

1 took me by surprise and I suspect it may have taken
2 a lot of people by surprise, was the degree to which,
3 once, with the legitimacy of democracy behind them, they
4 began to say, "No, no. We want to do this, we want to
5 take this responsibility. We want to move faster than
6 necessarily you might have assumed that we would".

7 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: What were some of the specific things
8 that we hoped the Maliki government would do, and how
9 were you able personally in your relationship with the
10 Foreign Minister and so on to --

11 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: One of the things that we very
12 much hoped they would do, where we had, I feel, less
13 success than we might have wished -- and we did make
14 progress, I won't say that we didn't, but it wasn't as
15 fast or as thorough as we would have wished, and that
16 was on things like reconciliation and, you know, we
17 talked about this from time to time.

18 I can remember saying to Premier Maliki, I think in
19 Sharm El Sheikh at a bilateral meeting that we had
20 there, that one of the things I had learnt in my years
21 in politics is that there are fundamentally two ways of
22 approaching working in a government team: you can either
23 decide to try and build relationships of trust with
24 people you have to work with; or you can try to surround
25 yourself only with people in whom you already have

1 trust, and that the second is easier, but the first is
2 long-term better.

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Could I pursue that one further stage,
4 Mrs Beckett, because you spoke of the appetite to take
5 responsibility on the part of the newly elected
6 government in Iraq. A strong appetite, no experience at
7 all, or hardly any, of national government.

8 To what degree did they feel themselves held back by
9 that or perhaps overassertive in response to it? You
10 yourself, for example --

11 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I'm inclined to say not enough,
12 actually.

13 THE CHAIRMAN: Not enough?

14 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: But that's a bit unfair.

15 I mean it became very evident, as we talked about
16 transition of the provinces and about the military
17 involvement and so on -- I think it was things like --
18 particularly the very sensitive areas, like
19 relationships with the militias, where everybody
20 agreed -- at least in principle, everybody agreed that
21 it was necessary to tackle the militias, although it
22 would be difficult, and that unless -- I mean,
23 I remember right at the beginning, the Prime Minister
24 had said -- Prime Minister Maliki had said that it has
25 to be a non-sectarian government and it should only be

1 the Iraqi security forces who carry weapons.

2 So the understanding and the belief that that was
3 the right approach were there, but then, when it came to
4 actually tackling the militias, often there was
5 something of a disagreement about how far you could go
6 or quite how you did it and so on. So when we turned
7 later to Operation Sinbad on which I know you have had
8 evidence already, there was a wariness about how fast it
9 could go. So it was things like that.

10 THE CHAIRMAN: Is this partly because the militias are in
11 some sense part of the political support structure for
12 some of the individual politicians --

13 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Very much so.

14 THE CHAIRMAN: -- rather than a simple matter of military
15 power or whatever? Yes.

16 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Just one more question before I hand
17 over to Baroness Prashar. You mention in your statement
18 in the House of Commons on 5 February 2007 that your
19 goal, the United Kingdom's goal, was:

20 "To promote reconciliation between Iraq's
21 communities and a non-sectarian approach both to
22 government and more widely."

23 How did you try to do that and how successful were
24 you at the time?

25 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: A mixture of things, I suppose.

1 One of the -- most important I think, certainly one that
2 was urged on me from the very beginning was to be
3 reassuring to the Government of Iraq about the support
4 that there was for them and about the fact that people
5 would be there to help them and so on, because there was
6 a feeling -- and I remember one of the major players --
7 it may be wiser not to name him -- saying to me after
8 quite a long conversation about a number of things:

9 "Of course the real trouble in Iraq ..."

10 This was a Shia speaking:

11 "... is that the Shia are now in power but they feel
12 still in opposition."

13 I think I said to him that having had some years of
14 both, that opposition is easier, but power is better.

15 THE CHAIRMAN: Usha?

16 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you. Mrs Beckett, could

17 I just pursue this record of reconciliation, because it
18 was a period of real friction?

19 Can you just tell me, apart from these
20 conversations, the very interesting ones you had, what
21 were the practical steps you were taking to support the
22 Iraqi Government in their process of reconciliation?

23 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: It was, I think, June or July
24 that -- June, that the Prime Minister published his
25 reconciliation plan and there was -- all of this, by

1 the way, took much longer than anybody thought.

2 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Of course.

3 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: When I said there were themes,
4 one of the themes that was mentioned to me in my
5 earliest briefings was that there would have to be
6 a review of the constitution, and this was agreed, but
7 it didn't happen for absolutely ages, and dealing with
8 the militias and so on. Better relations with Arab
9 neighbours.

10 So, on the one hand, one was offering support and
11 encouragement to the government itself and to the
12 players in the government, trying to encourage --
13 I mean, I think we did bring people from
14 Northern Ireland to talk to them, trying to encourage
15 them with other experiences that other people had had of
16 how difficult --

17 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you drew on the Northern Ireland
18 experience?

19 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: There was some involvement with
20 using the Northern Ireland experience. I'm crossing my
21 fingers at this point.

22 The issue of relations with other neighbours. Every
23 time we talked to the other neighbours, we encouraged
24 them both to be supportive and welcoming to the
25 Government of Iraq and to see what could be done to help

1 them. Not just financially, although that was part of
2 it, but in other ways, and also insofar as -- because
3 quite a number of them had their own context, their own
4 levers, if you like, with different elements in Iraqi
5 society, to ask them to use their influence to help to
6 create an atmosphere in which reconciliation could be --

7 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Which were the specific neighbouring
8 countries that you were talking to?

9 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: All the geographical --

10 THE CHAIRMAN: Including Iran?

11 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Including Iran?

12 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Well, we had relations, of
13 course, with Iran, unlike the United States, and we did
14 try to have constructive conversations. I have to say
15 that, during my time there, the feeling -- and this was
16 coming from Iraqis right across the board -- was that
17 Iran did not wish to play a positive role and about the
18 last thing that they wanted to do was to pursue
19 reconciliation, and, of course, we had people like
20 Al-Qaeda in Iraq whose sole purpose seemed to be at one
21 point to try to promote civil war.

22 So you know, it was a matter of helping and
23 supporting and encouraging people and, of course, there
24 was, I think as Geoff Hoon said to you, I entirely share
25 his admiration for Grand Ayatollah Sistani, who I'm sure

1 was a hugely important influence on helping to keep the
2 lid on what otherwise could have been a complete
3 sectarian explosion and, of course, what some people had
4 designed to be just such an explosion.

5 THE CHAIRMAN: The really big attitudinal and traditional
6 difficulties you were having to bridge in terms of the
7 neighbours, Sunni regimes, looking for the first time at
8 a Shia democracy, that's a big jump to make, isn't it?

9 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I'm not quite sure which of
10 those two words they disliked most, actually.

11 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Who were you working through in
12 terms of who were the people on the ground kind of
13 giving you the information on the basis of which you
14 were developing your strategy, your objectives?

15 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Our own people. Our own
16 ambassadors in the relevant countries and so on, and,
17 again, there were the very good links. I have to say
18 I had the utmost confidence, which I think circumstances
19 justified, in people like William Patey and
20 Dominic Asquith and so on. They were people in whom
21 I felt, not only in whom you could repose trust, but you
22 could be confident that, if there was something that
23 they needed to bring forcefully to your attention, that
24 they would do so.

25 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Do you believe that was an effective

1 policy, given the scale of the sectarian violence at the
2 time, because it was -- I think Dominic Asquith was
3 saying it was a period of intense friction and 2006 was
4 effectively a battle for the soul of Iraq.

5 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Yes, I have seen him use that
6 phrase. I didn't know if he had used it to you. But
7 I have seen him use that phrase and I think that was
8 true.

9 I mean, in effect, you are asking me whether there
10 was more that we could have done and I think all I can
11 say to you is that we did, as much as we could, identify
12 what we thought would work as intensively and as
13 effectively as we could. I don't think there was ever
14 a point when anybody said, "Oh, no, I don't think it is
15 worthwhile bothering with that".

16 If somebody said, "Try that, do that, make that
17 phone call", one did, and, you know, it is not easy to
18 see what alternatives lay before us, because, as has
19 just been said a moment ago, although these are people
20 who are potential friends of Iraq, there is a history
21 there --

22 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Indeed.

23 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: -- you know, people looking
24 with a degree of wariness, and, of course, the
25 undercurrent to all of this all the way through, Syria

1 making positive noises but not necessarily acting in any
2 very different way, and Iran making it clear all over
3 the place that, "There is a string of areas where we can
4 create trouble for you and we will, if you don't stop
5 creating what we consider to be trouble for us".

6 So, you know, that was an undercurrent the entire
7 time.

8 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Can I move on to the question of
9 transition to Iraqi control because there was another
10 theme you could say, which was kind of around?

11 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Very much.

12 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: What was the timescale that you
13 envisaged withdrawing the troops from Iraq? I mean,
14 when you were Foreign Secretary.

15 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Slipping I think would be my
16 one-word summary. I can't recall exactly, because there
17 are so many, looking through the back papers. I think
18 early on -- Muthanna was the first one to go and that,
19 I think, was in July -- of our four -- July 2006. We
20 had, I think, hoped -- it had been hoped that it would
21 have gone a bit earlier, but it went relatively quietly
22 and relatively smoothly, all things considered, when it
23 did happen. So basically we tried very, very hard not
24 to get pinned into artificial deadlines that then made
25 it look as if something was going badly wrong if we

1 couldn't deliver, and, of course, we were absolutely
2 determined all the way through, we had this joint committee -- that
it was going to

4 be conditions-based and we were not going to get trapped
5 in a situation, where, because we had said April 25 or
6 something, and then things were not going well enough
7 on April 25, that we would hand over in an inadequate
8 state, and I think everybody was of one mind on that.

9 So I think it was the right process. As I say, it
10 did take longer than we had hoped and with some quite
11 notable events along the way. Hiccoughs and otherwise.
12 I mean, the thing which stuck very forcibly in my mind,
13 although I had a bit of difficulty tracing it in the
14 papers, the October -- I don't know what you would call
15 it -- uprising in Maysan, which was a province where
16 there was always more difficulty than, for example,
17 Muthanna, where I think there was a real sort of
18 question, "Now what will happen?" and the Iraqis dealt
19 with it and our people moved into a position where they
20 could help, if called on, and were not called on.

21 So there were things like that that were quite
22 reassuring, even though it was going more slowly than we
23 might have hoped, but all the time there was this kind
24 of creative tension between wanting to give
25 responsibility, people being wary as to whether things

1 were in a good enough state and also having perhaps
2 various other concerns like the border in Maysan, for
3 example, but all through this -- what I said to
4 Sir Martin earlier on, all through this, increasingly,
5 with increasing insistence and volume, the Government of
6 Iraq saying, "We want to take this responsibility, we
7 want" -- not pressing us to hand over in inadequate
8 circumstances, but certainly not wanting, not willing to
9 see a slowdown more than the actual conditions required,
10 and that was sometimes a difficult thing for some people
11 to adjust to.

12 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Was Afghanistan having an impact in
13 terms of a drawdown? Because, you know, there were two
14 priorities here, Afghanistan and Iraq? Was there an
15 impact?

16 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I think that for the military
17 and for the MoD there were always sort of questions
18 about the impact on their overall capacity, but it was
19 not something that impinged particularly on my role
20 within it.

21 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Because it was during this period
22 that the United States announced a surge.

23 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Indeed.

24 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: We were looking to withdraw towards
25 an exit strategy. Do you think that was determined by

1 priorities in relation to Afghanistan or was it the fact
2 that we thought it was the right thing to do?

3 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: No, it was the fact that we
4 thought that was the right thing to do, that that was
5 the process to which we had committed ourselves, that
6 although it was going more slowly than people had
7 initially imagined, it was going, it was happening, it
8 was continuing, and, as I say, all the way through,
9 there was this pressure from the Government of Iraq, and
10 I remember quite vividly, and I think Des Browne
11 mentioned this to you -- was it yesterday?

12 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Yes, yesterday.

13 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: That having -- having to handle
14 the kind of perception, particularly here, although,
15 mercifully, it was mostly for Des to handle, the kind
16 of, "Well, if the Americans are doing one thing and you
17 are doing another, obviously you are going in completely
18 different directions", and actually, no, because, in
19 fact, in other provinces in Iraq the Americans were
20 continuing with exactly the same process that we were
21 pursuing in our four provinces.

22 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Do you think that we handed over the
23 responsibility to the Iraqi security forces at about the
24 right time, that they were ready for it, sufficient
25 enough to sort of take care of the wellbeing of the

1 Iraqi citizens, or did we rush it?

2 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: No, I don't think we rushed it
3 because -- I mean, I'm sure it is not perfect and I'm
4 sure that it could have been better, but the question,
5 I think, is: is it good enough? Was it good enough?
6 Particularly given their very real desire to take their
7 own responsibilities, and if you think, for example,
8 about Charge of the Knights which took place, in fact,
9 after I had left the Foreign Office but which we had
10 hoped something like it would take place earlier, again
11 there was a sort of tension there of what they thought
12 was practicable to do, the way that it was practical to
13 do it at the time, and then ultimately taking more steps
14 themselves when they were in charge.

15 I remember being briefed about Sinbad before it
16 started and being very encouraged to feel that this
17 sounded like a process that could work. But also being
18 conscious of the fact that -- again, you would be
19 placing reliance and they would be wanting to bring the
20 Iraqi security forces more and more into the forefront
21 and, of course, by the time we got to the end of Sinbad,
22 they were actually in the lead and we were the support
23 instead of the other way round.

24 Was it good enough? Well, I think Sinbad is a good
25 example, actually, because quite early on, I think after

1 the first couple of areas had been dealt with, we
2 started to hear back that people in other areas were
3 saying, "When are you coming to our bit?" you know, "We
4 like the sound of this, we like the look of this, this
5 is what we want you to do".

6 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you would say that we were kind
7 of pushing the right kind of strategy?

8 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Yes, not perfect --

9 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Not perfect.

10 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: -- but a lot better than it had
11 been and it had to be compatible. You know, we had
12 a democratically elected government. They wanted to
13 take responsibility. That's what they were elected to
14 do.

15 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Okay. Earlier we were talking about
16 the national reconciliation. You began to talk about
17 the relations with the neighbours and how you were
18 working through them to actually promote national
19 reconciliation. What was the impact of the
20 international compact for Iraq which was launched
21 in May 2007?

22 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I think it was fairly positive.
23 People were willing to be involved, not perhaps
24 initially as enthusiastic as we might have hoped, but
25 prepared, and I think one of the things that we wanted

1 to do was to give an opportunity for the wider
2 international community to be drawn into that, not
3 necessarily so much just with giving any financial
4 support that they could, but giving other kinds of
5 support and experience and so on, and helping the
6 Government of Iraq to take their proper place in the
7 community of nations, if you like, and, of course, part
8 of the key goals of the compact were to have some kind
9 of an agreement of steps that the Government of Iraq
10 would then be trying to pursue, a process of change and
11 of reform that could be supported, mentored, delivered,
12 measured, something that could give a feeling to their
13 neighbours and to their friends and less than friends of
14 an Iraq that was visibly making progress of the kind
15 that most people, I think, would wish to see.

16 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: How did our policy towards the
17 regional countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran
18 affect our policy options for Iraq?

19 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Not a great deal, I think.
20 I mean, let's take them very separately. I was thinking
21 particularly of Saudi Arabia when I said that. I mean,
22 we had good relations with Saudi Arabia. They didn't
23 always totally see eye to eye with us about some aspects
24 of the situation in Iraq, but we kind of agreed to
25 disagree. But they were quite positive about a number

1 of things. They were not unhelpful with regard to
2 Iran -- well, I mean, I think our relations with Iran
3 through that period were quite difficult, in that -- and
4 not, I would say, of our making, because what we were
5 doing at that point was trying to hold open the door for
6 the Government of Iran.

7 I mean, although originally it was completely
8 confidential, but the six governments did make an
9 extremely sweeping and generous offer to the Government
10 of Iran to deliver everything that they said they were
11 seeking by way of access to civil nuclear power and
12 a great deal more beside, including direct discussions
13 and participation with the United States and some of the
14 recognition for their role and their potential power
15 that they were clearly wanting, and yet, all the way
16 through meeting with delay, prevarication and complete
17 lack of response, and then, of course -- I can't quite
18 recall what the date was, but at one point -- March, was
19 it -- they detained a number of Royal Navy personnel,
20 whom they said had strayed into Iranian waters.

21 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But by the time you left office,
22 what do you think had been achieved in terms of
23 relations with neighbouring countries?

24 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I think we continued to have
25 extremely good relationships with -- although

1 I appreciate this was not the -- perhaps the public
2 perception. We continued to have good relationships,
3 despite the problems in the Lebanon, with most of the
4 players in the Middle East.

5 I recall reading frequently that no one in the
6 Middle East had any more any regard for our approach or
7 would ever speak to us again or whatever. That wasn't
8 what anybody was telling me. In fact, the opposite,
9 that people were continually of the view that we, the
10 British, had a great deal to contribute, a great deal of
11 experience and expertise and -- although it is not the
12 kind of word anybody would dream of using anywhere in
13 political life here, but wisdom to contribute to all of
14 these discussions.

15 So one of the things that I sought to do when
16 I became Foreign Secretary was to build good
17 relationships with everyone I could, of course, but
18 particularly around that region, because of the tensions
19 and because of it being such a key region, and I felt
20 that we did indeed continue to have good relationships
21 with them and I'm sure that we do now.

22 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you very much.

23 THE CHAIRMAN: Before turning to Sir Martin for some
24 concluding questions, I think there are two themes it
25 would be interesting to hear about. One is in terms of

1 Iraq's developing relations with its neighbours in the
2 region. It is, of course -- and it set itself
3 explicitly the object of becoming a very major oil
4 producer indeed. Has that set up more tension with the
5 OPEC neighbours or is it a matter of reality that they
6 simply will have to engage as Iraq develops its oil
7 production capability?

8 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I don't think it has set up
9 a great deal more tension yet, or certainly hadn't
10 during my time, but perhaps that's partly because, as
11 with so many other things, things had not proceeded at
12 the pace at which one might have assumed.

13 The thing -- and I'm particularly looking back
14 through the papers. The thing that I was reminded of
15 quite sharply. I think other people have said to you
16 that -- people have been quoted as saying that Iraq was
17 not in anything like the state that people had imagined.
18 Things were much worse. Infrastructure and so on, much,
19 much more decayed than anybody imagined, and it reminded
20 me, frankly, of East Germany, before the wall came down,
21 that there were all sorts of nervousnesses and anxieties
22 and expectations and I recall being told how much more
23 successful as an economy East Germany was than many of
24 the other countries of the Eastern Bloc, and yet, in
25 fact, it turned out there were a lot more problems.

1 I feel Iraq was a bit the same. So there is more
2 investment and more provision of service and so on
3 needed to make them an oil competitor than probably they
4 have yet had. Are other people looking over their
5 shoulder at them with a degree of nervousness and
6 perhaps a bit of jealousy? Of course.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I can't resist it, because, when
8 I heard it first, it was such a telling, vivid metaphor
9 applied originally to the Soviet Union but also to the
10 Eastern Bloc, the knight dying in its armour, and, in
11 a sense Saddam's Iraq, the infrastructure of it at
12 least, and perhaps the human infrastructure, was that,
13 wasn't it?

14 Which does bring me to my last point, which is to
15 mention the great difficulty we have heard from a lot of
16 witnesses, military and other, about building a reliable
17 and incorrupt and effective police service in Iraq, both
18 at the local level, where things are obviously very
19 difficult, but also at the national level.

20 The one question there is, I think: is the British
21 experience the best gift we have to offer or are
22 countries with a Carabinieri or Gendarmerie regime
23 better placed to build a police service for a country
24 like Iraq? I wondered whether you had formed a view.

25 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Well, the British experience

1 was principally what we had to offer, of course, and
2 I think it was right for us to offer it, and I think,
3 although that, too, was a slow process and one of the
4 most difficult and alarming that we undertook, there did
5 begin to be some encouraging signs.

6 When, for example, we set up the Department of
7 Internal Affairs, I think we called it, after the
8 shutting down of the so-called Serious Crimes Unit,
9 whose principal goals seemed to be to commit as many of
10 them as they could, then I think some of those steps
11 were good and I think the tradition of the British
12 police service is a good one.

13 However, I have got a feeling -- and this is a sort
14 of stray memory, but I think: (a) we would have been
15 happy to have others contributing; and (b) that we did
16 to a small extent encourage that.

17 THE CHAIRMAN: Particularly the Italians?

18 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Yes, and when things were very
19 difficult people were perhaps understandably a bit wary
20 and I think somebody did say at some point in all of
21 this that you can't set up the Surrey police force or
22 whatever it was, and that is clearly true, but -- and
23 the police service were a huge thorn in everyone's side,
24 whereas we made very good progress, for example with the
25 10th Division and people began to have a lot of

1 confidence, but I think that to bring the best
2 traditions of incorruptibility and of service to the
3 public and so on, I think that that was worth doing.

4 What kind of police service emerges in Iraq in the
5 end is partly a matter of what police service they want,
6 partly a matter of what their responsibilities are, the
7 balance of responsibilities in a country like Iraq may
8 not be quite the same as it is here, but I think it was
9 worth doing, and certainly the mentors and trainers that
10 I met, who were engaged in it, seemed to feel that they
11 were doing something worthwhile and that's why they were
12 prepared to go on doing it under what were quite
13 dangerous and difficult circumstances.

14 THE CHAIRMAN: It was, wasn't it, a partial contribution to
15 our wider effort -- is this right -- to bring about
16 a system of law and justice which we would recognise as
17 successful?

18 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Indeed.

19 THE CHAIRMAN: Which, without an effective policing system,
20 you can't have.

21 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Absolutely and that again is
22 another example of where I recall noticing that I think
23 we had been concentrating on things like putting in
24 advisers and steps of that kind, and the Iraqis, quite
25 early on, said, "Hang on a minute, what we would really

1 like you to do is to put money in to take away the costs
2 and provide training for a lot of our judges. We would
3 rather have a whole lot more judges trained than we
4 would have advisers", and that was another fairly early
5 example of them saying, "I know you want to help us.
6 That's great. We want you to help us in this area, but,
7 actually, the best way we think you can help us is to do
8 this rather than that".

9 THE CHAIRMAN: Was the Government of Iraq, once elected,
10 equally open to our ambition, as we have heard it, to
11 bring about a proper recognition and progress on
12 a human rights agenda which had no natural roots in the
13 Saddam area?

14 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Indeed. It was one of the many
15 areas where the willingness was definitely expressed,
16 the execution was perhaps slower and more difficult to
17 achieve, and tragically, as you say, it seems to me that
18 there were, as you know, a couple of really quite nasty
19 incidents, where it was found that detention facilities
20 were in the most dreadful state and people being badly
21 treated.

22 That was, of course, much more in the traditions of
23 Saddam's Iraq than one could be comfortable with, and
24 there is no doubt it does give an indication of the
25 scale of what people are trying to achieve in creating

1 something of which they don't have anything like as much
2 experience as one would wish.

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Just as a final point on this, the position
4 of women, what is, not quite, but nearly uniquely
5 a secular state in the Middle East, is it an exemplar
6 for other neighbouring states or is it something that is
7 unique to Iraq. How far has it got to go?

8 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Well, I'm not sure that I would
9 dare to say it was an exemplar. I think the person you
10 probably all ought to ask about that is Ann Clwyd, who
11 came to and fro from Iraq for many years and was
12 pressing people to take action about Iraq for many years
13 when it was falling on deaf ears, and who I know has
14 lots and lots of contacts, particularly among women in
15 Iraq.

16 I would certainly say that there are some very
17 impressive Iraqi women in political life, and -- not
18 fully in political life, but I have found that to be
19 true, actually, in a lot of other countries where their
20 position is perhaps not so readily recognised.

21 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Sir Martin, you have got one or
22 two points to ask.

23 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: I have just got really one point to
24 ask, that you would look back over your period as
25 Foreign Secretary, and recalling your expectations with

1 regard to what could be done in and for Iraq when you
2 became Foreign Secretary, what, at the end of your
3 period -- and we have mentioned briefly police and
4 judges -- do you feel the United Kingdom was best and
5 most able to do to advance the cause of Iraqi
6 self-government and achieving what our goals have been
7 initially for an independent Iraq?

8 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I suppose it is not an easy
9 question to answer because I don't want to be -- to
10 downplay a lot of what was achieved. But I suppose that
11 the achievement of provincial Iraqi control, the fact of
12 being able to hand over responsibility and of that being
13 able to be exercised and the kind of very real
14 improvements, because, although it wasn't specifically
15 linked to it, the experience of Operation Sinbad, of
16 people welcoming the changes that could be made, of
17 being able to see real improvement, including in the
18 police service in the specific areas where they operated
19 and so on, I think those were things that were evidence
20 of the benefits of the contribution that we could make.

21 I think there were some moves. I think during the
22 period there were definite improvements on
23 reconciliation, for example, although there remained
24 always a subtext of, "But we weren't included enough",
25 or whatever, and it was a bit up and down, and from

1 something I saw in the media the other day -- I don't
2 know whether it is on one of its downs at the moment,
3 but these were things -- I would say -- I would --
4 I hope it doesn't seem too Pollyanna-ish, I would almost
5 say that all of these were things on which we made
6 progress, on some more than others, but I think in one
7 sense I would almost say that the biggest achievement
8 was for there to be a government in Iraq which was
9 democratically elected, which recognises and wishes to
10 assume responsibility for its own affairs, and which is
11 pushing to do so, and not all of the ways in which it
12 has been pushing to do it are ways that we would think
13 are ideal.

14 We might have a different timeline, we might have
15 a different pattern, but that's something they have
16 never had either, and I remember right back at the
17 beginning, Walid Jumblatt, I think, saying that to his
18 surprise he found that he was -- I can't remember what
19 word he used, but he was absolutely thrilled to see the
20 people of Iraq going to vote and having the chance of
21 a democratic election, and that the way in which --
22 whatever its flaws, whatever its problems, the way in
23 which that government has then felt the need to take
24 their futures into their own hands, I actually think
25 that's quite important.

1 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Thank you very much.

2 THE CHAIRMAN: Usha?

3 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Can we come back to Whitehall?

4 Because, as you know, we are a lessons learned exercise.

5 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Indeed.

6 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I would just like to hear what

7 lessons we can learn from Iraq about the way the UK

8 policy developed in Whitehall.

9 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Well, I think, some of the --

10 perhaps some of the best examples of the ways in which

11 people worked together on a complex practical project,

12 once things kind of got going, are probably to be

13 learned from that.

14 Where that didn't quite happen, that's an indication

15 of what happens when governments don't work as

16 cohesively as they should, but I think this whole area

17 is one where you can see what a difference it makes.

18 I mean, we are talking about an area of policy and

19 a set of decisions that were immensely controversial,

20 and remain so, immensely unpopular, and remain so, very,

21 very difficult for people, as individuals, and for

22 politicians, as individuals, for their other links and

23 so on, and yet, basically, we were able to have good

24 enough communications and good enough understanding of

25 what was happening right across the period for people to

1 stick together, and we did, and I think maybe that's
2 a lesson for the politicians rather than for Whitehall
3 but I think that was and is important.

4 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But, I mean, Iraq turned out to be
5 a long haul.

6 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Indeed.

7 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: It is a question of how you organise
8 delivery policy priorities in countries in emerging sort
9 of -- you know, in conflict. Are there any lessons
10 there?

11 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I think -- yes, I think there
12 will be a lot of things to be learned, particularly from
13 some of the things that went somewhat better in Iraq.
14 Could we have -- could we have known more about what was
15 likely to happen in the security situation? I'm not
16 sure.

17 I mean, there was an understanding that there would
18 be sectarian differences. I think the two things that
19 no one predicted and to what extent -- how you draw your
20 lessons from this, one is the issue about the condition
21 of Iraq, which I referred to earlier on. I think the
22 other thing, which one would -- I certainly would not
23 have predicted it, and I'm not sure that anyone did.
24 I don't think anyone thought that either Syria or Iran
25 would be helpful but I don't think that people would

1 have predicted that Iran in particular would be as
2 directly and strongly a negative influence as they were
3 in a whole variety of ways.

4 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: I think there was knowledge about
5 the Shia and Sunni tensions and the insecurity of the
6 Kurds.

7 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Exactly.

8 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: It could have fractured. That is
9 something people did anticipate.

10 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Yes, they did, and, you know,
11 people still were speculating about that for quite some
12 time. I recall being asked a question about whether
13 Iraq was going to divide and split into regions and so
14 on, and I said -- or did we want it to? Were we opposed
15 to it? And saying what seemed to me to be entirely --
16 almost non-committal, but very much kind of, "Look, we
17 think that the unity of Iraq is important, but, of
18 course, this is a matter for the Iraqis", and of course,
19 by then, we were seeing more and more the Iraqis saying
20 "We will decide that, thanks very much", and being
21 accused of having -- I can't remember -- encouraged the
22 federalisation of Iraq or said that it was going to
23 break up or whatever -- you know, the British Government
24 didn't care if it did or not, whereas all I was really
25 trying to do was respect the role and the importance of

1 the Iraqis.

2 So I think there are tensions there. There will
3 remain tensions there. You get differing accounts. My
4 impression is that there is a growing recognition of
5 Iraq's own national interest and the wish to pursue
6 that, alongside the other relationships, link,
7 identities, and so on, and that, after all, is something
8 we see in the United Kingdom itself.

9 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: My final question really is about
10 building alliances with others to deliver our UK
11 objectives, and not least, you know, working with the
12 Americans, the United Nations, the World Bank, and so
13 on. What lessons can you draw on some of those issues?

14 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: All of the international
15 organisations were really pretty helpful and
16 co-operative. A slight hesitation at first, perhaps, on
17 the side of the UN, but if we think of the international
18 compact, for example, we thought from very early on that
19 it was essential that it was seen to be led by the UN
20 and by Iraq, both for its effectiveness and also to give
21 the greatest opportunity to draw in the greatest
22 possible number of players who could participate in
23 a variety of ways, and the UN very, very speedily
24 accepted that, stepped up to the plate, were very
25 prepared to be involved. People like the World Bank

1 again.

2 So my impression was that, yes, those -- whatever
3 people -- different agreements people may have made, may
4 have had, they put them behind them, took part.

5 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So by the time you became Foreign
6 Secretary, you think they had put them behind them and
7 were beginning to work.

8 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: In one or two cases perhaps
9 slightly grudgingly, but I don't care if people are
10 grudging or not so long as they do what I want.

11 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you. That's a good lesson.

12 THE CHAIRMAN: We have just one or two final questions
13 starting with Sir Lawrence.

14 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you. Right at the start of
15 our story in January 2002, President Bush made his
16 famous Axis of Evil speech in which he put together Iraq
17 with Iran and North Korea. In terms of your experience
18 as Foreign Secretary, did the focus on Iraq make it
19 harder to deal with the other two?

20 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: No, I don't think I would say
21 that, because, as I say, for my part, the links in Iraq
22 and the work on which people were engaged in Iraq was
23 ongoing. The goals had been set, the process was in
24 place, it had taken longer, for example, to find
25 a Prime Minister or a candidate who was acceptable

1 enough to enough the players, to get the government in
2 place and so on, but this was a running theme. It had
3 its peaks, it had its difficulties, there were moments
4 when you worried about how badly things were going to
5 turn, when security was very bad and so on, but
6 basically it was an ongoing thing and it didn't prevent
7 us from being engaged with the Iran issue, or the
8 ongoing work with North Korea.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: My question really again goes back
10 to the evidence we've received, that suggests that, if
11 you are looking on a scale of seriousness, that even in
12 2002 it was apparent that Iran, North Korea and Libya,
13 at least on the nuclear side, represented far more
14 serious cases than Iraq, as things turned out much more
15 serious cases.

16 You, as you described, found yourself thrown into
17 the Iran issue almost in your first days. So my
18 question really is one of whether the preoccupations
19 with Iraq meant that it was very difficult to take on
20 this other question as well.

21 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: No. I would say definitely
22 not. I mean, the timing was a little different.
23 Perhaps I should say, because I'm not sure whether this
24 ever comes through clearly, that without anybody being
25 starry-eyed, there was something of a hope that much

1 more could be achieved than has been hitherto with Iran
2 in terms of the diplomatic route.

3 I said earlier we kept the initial offer that was
4 made to Iran. I mean, there had been an early offer,
5 but there was a big new offer which involved the
6 Americans, almost from my first days in the job, which
7 was a big change, and it was an offer, the scale and
8 nature of which had not been offered to anybody probably
9 in the world before. It was very, very
10 all-encompassing. It was very generous. It had huge
11 potential.

12 We really did think that there was just a chance
13 that Iran would begin to engage and go for it, and it
14 was only after repeated disappointments that it began to
15 look as if actually they were not going to be prepared
16 to do so.

17 Now, none of that -- I mean, I'm not quite sure
18 whether there is something underlying your question
19 about: should we have bothered with Iraq? I don't think
20 it would have been any easier to deal with Iran if the
21 Iraq events had not taken place.

22 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: There are two issues. There is,
23 first, a question as to whether the status, the
24 prestige, the resources of the US and the UK were so
25 bound up with Iraq, before you arrived -- I can

1 understand -- that meant it was very difficult to put
2 the same sort of pressure that might have been done on
3 Iraq.

4 There is another issue which you may have a view on,
5 which is whether, in the situation of 2006/2007, that
6 the potential role that Iranian-backed militias could
7 play within Iraq created a sense of vulnerability that,
8 if a major confrontation had developed with Iran, this
9 would be a place where we would feel it.

10 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Well, they did their best to
11 make us feel it all the way through in a variety of ways
12 and I don't think anybody doubted that we simply could
13 not allow that to make a difference. To be perfectly
14 honest, I'm not entirely sure that I'm quite getting the
15 underlying thrust of your remarks.

16 If you are saying -- we, the UK, perhaps would have
17 had to -- couldn't take on something else like another
18 Iraq in the circumstances where we were engaged in Iraq
19 and Afghanistan, but, I mean, the Americans have immense
20 resources and capacity. But it was never -- it was
21 always my understanding, although one could -- one can
22 read a thousand contributions from a Washington source
23 that said that the Americans would have liked to take on
24 Iran militarily. That was never my impression.

25 You know, I think that none of these -- you can't be

1 simply concentrating on one thing and leave everything
2 else aside. Libya, after all, did make the change.
3 There are those who argue, and they may well be right,
4 that one of the reasons for Libya making the change that
5 they did was the events that they had seen unfold, but
6 I don't think in that sense that the involvement that we
7 had in Iraq in any way undermined people's approach to
8 other areas, including North Korea.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Okay. Could I ask you a completely
10 different sort of question? Because we have asked you
11 to comment on the period when you were Foreign
12 Secretary, but I wonder if you would mind just talking
13 a bit about the period when you were a Cabinet minister
14 in the 2002/2003 period.

15 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Hm-mm.

16 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I'm really interested from your
17 perspective as a Cabinet minister at the time, but with
18 many other quite different preoccupations, how this
19 issue looked to you and the extent to which you thought
20 it was possible to get involved in the Cabinet
21 discussions?

22 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I don't remember -- as you will
23 now know, we had a lot of Cabinet discussions. I would
24 say two things. I don't recall how much I actually said
25 because -- I mean, I'm sure there were times when I did

1 contribute, because I tended to try not to repeat
2 something that somebody had already said and --
3 unless -- there are occasions, of course, when it is
4 important to know whether X has said this, but does
5 anybody agree, and sometimes it is important to say
6 "Actually, I think that's right", or whatever. But
7 I tried not to take the time of Cabinet by repeating
8 exactly the same contributions that somebody else had
9 made or by making observations which seemed to me to be
10 utterly self-evident, like, for example, "Wouldn't it be
11 wonderful if the Germans and French would do X or Y".
12 I can remember muttering to Jack Straw when
13 I sat next to him at the time, "If only you had thought
14 of that, Jack."

15 So I tried not to detain colleagues with
16 contributions that didn't contribute or add anything
17 very much, other than if it seemed that it might be
18 useful to give an indication of voices.

19 I felt that we were kept extremely well informed.
20 I mean, I have over the period since, and probably to
21 some extent at the time, read all kinds of things, some
22 of them coming from people who are -- who have a much
23 greater professional reputation and expertise in all of
24 this than any politician, any mere politician, perhaps
25 I should say, about how Cabinet works and what it means

1 and how much people were involved and so on, and all
2 I would say to you is that, with the one small exception
3 of something that he said about Robin Cook's judgment on
4 some of these things - I didn't think he got it - quite right, when
I read Andrew Turnbull's evidence to you, I was

6 profoundly relieved because I thought, "Oh, I wasn't --
7 I haven't been imagining this all this time. This is
8 a world I recognise. This is exactly what I think it
9 was like in Cabinet, when we had lots of information
10 about what was happening, where we had the opportunity
11 to make a contribution".

12 I remember having read some stuff once about how
13 there should have been one kind of -- I don't know,
14 what, some kind of apocalyptic meeting, and, of course,
15 there was a meeting at which we took the decision and we
16 knew we would be taking the decision to take military
17 action, and that's apocalyptic enough for me, thank you
18 very much, but there seemed to be an assumption
19 underlying that that people didn't know what they were
20 doing and hadn't had the opportunity to think about
21 these things and hadn't had the opportunity to discuss
22 them, and for me it never felt like that.

23 Both Jack and Tony were assiduous in keeping people
24 informed, always prepared to engage in discussion, and
25 I felt that -- we may as well put it on the record,

1 since you asked me -- I felt that we had had evidence
2 put before us that we could not ignore and that we took
3 a decision to act on that evidence, and I recognised
4 completely, as I said earlier, that that was hugely
5 controversial and I recognise with considerable regret
6 that somehow the dialogue has moved in a direction where
7 there are a lot of people who think nobody is acting in
8 any kind of good faith.

9 All I can say to you is that it never felt like that
10 to me and it doesn't feel like it now. We may have been
11 wrong. We were trying to do what we thought was right.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just can I ask you a couple of
13 follow-ups from that? First, you said that
14 Lord Turnbull wasn't right on Robin Cook.

15 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I disagreed with him. That's
16 not quite the same thing.

17 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Sorry, yes. In what way?

18 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: He said that he thought -- I'm
19 trying to get this right. He said he thought that -- it
20 was about containment, that Robin had believed that
21 containment was working and that it was also
22 sustainable, and I think the two are slightly different
23 things, and that he thought that Robin was right about
24 that, and I didn't think -- if that was Robin's view,
25 and it was never quite clear to me that that was what

1 Robin was arguing, but, if it was, it didn't seem to me
2 that containment was necessarily working. It depends
3 how you define it. If you mean, had he still got stocks
4 of chemical and biological weapons, we now know that he
5 had not, although we did not know that then.

6 But, for example, he had been able to start
7 developing missiles from missile parts. There was
8 a clear breach of containment there. One of the things
9 that everybody seems to have forgotten is that, at the
10 time, the pressure was actually to abandon sanctions
11 against Saddam's regime. Yes, there was an attempt to
12 say "Can we think of smarter sanctions?" but actually
13 all the pressure was -- and I have got a feeling --
14 I hope I'm not misleading anybody, but I have a feeling
15 that that little demonstration in Parliament Square
16 actually started as a demonstration against sanctions
17 against Saddam. There was enormous pressure.

18 So I think that it was not possible to maintain --
19 it was not going to be possible to maintain the
20 sanctions and I know that many people, of whom, if
21 I recall correctly, Dr David Kelly was one, were of the
22 view that, while Saddam remained in power, he would take
23 any opportunity offered to rebuild his stockpiles and
24 indeed to go on to develop the nuclear weapons to which
25 at that point he did not have access.

1 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Lastly, in relation to what we have
2 been talking about much of today, another suggestion has
3 been made, not least by Clare Short, that there should
4 have been a much fuller discussion of the legal advice
5 at Cabinet, that the nuances and complexities of the
6 Attorney General's position were not shown to the
7 Cabinet. What was your view of the discussion of the
8 legal issue?

9 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: Well, Peter Goldsmith, as you
10 know, came to Cabinet. He made it clear what was his
11 view. It was open to people to ask questions.
12 Obviously we had the text and I think everybody wanted
13 to look at it. Most -- actually, I might be wrong about
14 this -- I haven't counted heads --

15 I was about to say most of the people round the
16 Cabinet table wouldn't be lawyers. I hope I'm not
17 offending anybody here by saying there are quite a lot
18 about, but I think I'm basically right in saying that,
19 and, even if we were, we are not all lawyers in that
20 same constitutional role.

21 I mean, the Attorney General's advice to the
22 government, whether it is on something that is as
23 absolute vital as war and peace or on some other issue
24 where the Attorney General's advice is needed in that
25 very slightly odd capacity, but important capacity, that

1 he or she has, I mean, it kind of stands. — If you
2 yourself -- you might ask questions about what it means
3 and so on ...f you, yourself, are a lawyer, there might be merit
4 in getting into the discussion. I was never the
5 slightest bit surprised to learn that in earlier
6 iterations he had drawn attention to, "On the one hand
7 ... on the other hand", et cetera, et cetera. I mean
8 that's what lawyers do. With respect, that's what civil
9 servants do, but in the end -- and that's what
10 politicians do, but in the end there comes a point where
11 you say, "There is this and there is this and there is
12 this, but if you are saying: what is now my view, what
13 is the balance of my advice? This is it".

14 Well, that's it then. That's the balance of his
15 advice. You either take it or you don't take it, and
16 one thing -- I hope I'm not misusing this facility to
17 say one thing that I think has been dreadful about all
18 of this -- I don't know Peter Goldsmith all that well,
19 we're not bosom pals or anything like that, but my
20 impression of him has always been that he is a deeply,
21 deeply, honourable and serious man as well as very
22 clever lawyer. He could have made a great deal more
23 money outside government than he did by coming into it
24 and giving up his practice, and I feel that the way some
25

1 people have spoken and written about him is just
2 dreadful. I cannot think of -- my impression of him is
3 that there is absolutely nothing that would make him
4 give advice, particularly on an issue like this, that he
5 thought was anything other than the best possible advice
6 he could give, and I can't imagine any pressure that he
7 could be subject to that could make him give advice that
8 was anything other than what he thought.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We will have a chance to explore
10 that with him. Thank you very much.

11 THE CHAIRMAN: Mrs Beckett, thank you very much for your
12 evidence. Is there any final comment or comments you
13 would like to make that we haven't brought out so far
14 this afternoon?

15 RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP: I think probably, one way and
16 another, we have touched on most of them. I don't think
17 so. You know, there are all sorts of things about stuff
18 that happened in Basra at the time and so on, but
19 obviously you are familiar with all of that and we know
20 how a lot of that turned out.

21 So I think probably the only other thing that
22 I would say to you is that it is -- it was an underlying
23 and very serious thread through all the time that I was
24 at the Foreign Office, but I am afraid quite a lot of
25 the time there were other things that were more urgent

1 and more desperate to deal with.

2 THE CHAIRMAN: Mrs Beckett, thank you very much indeed.

3 I thank you and I thank all those who have been part of
4 our audience in the course of the day. Thank you for
5 attending.

6 We resume again at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning when
7 our witness will be Lord Goldsmith, who was the Attorney
8 General from June 2001 right through to June 2007. With
9 that, I will close today's session. Thank you very
10 much.

11 (4.51 pm)

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

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