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13 March 2003

Sir John Holmes KBE CVO CMG
Paris

Dear Ambassador,

FRANCE AND IRAQ

1. Gerard Errera came round to see me last night for a private talk about where things stood between us on Iraq.
2. He began with some remonstrating about how British Ministers had misconstrued President Chirac's comments about vetoing "whatever the circumstances". I brandished Le Monde at him with the quotation prominent on the front page. The French should not be surprised if Ministers were contrasting this with the constant efforts we were making to build common ground in the Security Council. We went through the current position and Errera did a bit of probing on how we saw things evolving. We agreed fairly quickly that the immediate crisis would now play out with France and UK on different positions, and that the more productive thing was to look ahead, and consider what lessons we should learn from recent events and how we can rebuild a constructive partnership once the hot crisis is over.
3. Errera's pitch was that Iraq exposed more clearly than any other case the fault-lines between the US and (some) Europeans on WMD, different reactions to 9.11 and Republican/Bush demonology about Saddam. Errera's assumptions were:
 - the UK would not want to go through again what we had been put through in recent weeks by the Americans;

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- nor would it be so easy for the UK to claim in the future that our policy of close alliance gave us real traction over US policy;
 - so when the dust had settled, there would be a new opportunity to rebuild a close France/Germany/UK relationship at the heart of the EU.
4. I agreed that Iraq was the hardest case for transatlantic policy-making. It showed up very starkly a difference of threat perception, with the UK, Spain, Italy and some others in Europe genuinely believing that the threat of WMD in the hands of a régime like Iraq, in a world inhabited by the likes of Al Qaida, was a worse prospect than the risks of military action to deal with it. I recognised that in France and Germany, the calculus was the other way round. I did a numero on the fact that our Ministers were genuinely convinced of the rightness of the policy, it was not poodleism, etc etc.
5. I went on to set out my own view of how things were likely to go after the immediate conflict phase. I thought that the humanitarian/reconstruction phase in Iraq was a possible area of reconciliation among Europeans: all recognising that however we had got to that point, the important thing was to get fully involved in rebuilding a new Iraq as a more comfortable neighbour, to work for regional stability and for progress on the MEPP. It was also important to contain the differences over Iraq. There were other important areas of business such as the Balkans, India/Pakistan, Afghanistan etc where life went on even now and which would come back up the agenda once Iraq was over. The US approach to the DPRK and Iran showed that they were not knee-jerk militarists: the DPRK was being handled in a strikingly multilateral way.
6. Errera acknowledged this willingly enough, but noted that an approach of getting back to business as usual on surrounding issues did not deal with the central underlying question as he saw it, which was that the Americans were determined to divide and rule among Europeans (old/new Europe etc) and to expect unquestioning support for whatever was their policy objective of the moment.
7. I disputed the model, but recognised that there was of course an issue of transatlantic relations. Dealing with the Americans in the EU and NATO would be different after Iraq. The acute poverty of EU/US relations was one part of this problem. I also thought that we would need to be more realistic in conventioning on CFSP. Grandiose ideas of a much strengthened CFSP régime,

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with QMV and a "European Foreign Minister" looked pretty hollow after the open warfare among us on Iraq. A bit more modesty in our ambitions might not be a bad thing. But I also agreed that EU3 coordination would remain essential. I had heard some bizarre German ideas about pulling back to the founding Six (minus the Italians). Errera dismissed this.

8. Errera did not have any new thoughts on how a different transatlantic relationship could be constructed in the light of Iraq beyond the need to strengthen Europe. He kept emphasising that the French felt pretty serene about where they were in this debate. But he too was keen that, as soon as the hot crisis was over, the three (at Foreign Minister or Political Director level) could get together quickly and plot a way forward. This reflects the message I have had from Laboulaye (and also from Michael Schaefer).

9. Comment: it sounds like there has been some consultation between the French and Germans on the need to send the Brits a message that, once we have stopped playing truant on Iraq, we will need to sit down seriously and talk about how to stop such behaviour in the future! But we can use this to re-establish operational cooperation, hopefully learning some lessons.

10. All this was very amicable, with Errera keen to keep channels open despite the difficulties. I hope he will have felt he had the same message in return from me.

Yours ever,
Jude Jackson
for Peter Ricketts

cc:

PUS

Mr Darroch

Mr Chaplin

Mr Barrow, CFSPD

~~Sir P Manning, No. 10~~

Sir S Wall, No. 10

Sir N Sheinwald, UKREP Brussels

Sir E Jones Parry, UKDEL NATO

Sir P Lever, Berlin

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