

1 (11.30 am)

2 MARK ETHERINGTON

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Good morning and welcome back to those who
4 were here earlier in the morning and welcome to our
5 witness.

6 In this session, we are hearing from
7 Mark Etherington. You were head of the Basra Provincial
8 Reconstruction Team between April 2006 and January 2007.
9 I think.

10 MARK ETHERINGTON: That's correct.

11 THE CHAIRMAN: Mr Etherington had served previously in Iraq
12 as coordinator of Wasit province during the CPA time.
13 Now, we do not intend to focus on this latter
14 appointment in the time we have available this morning
15 unless you want to add any general reflection about it
16 at the end of the session.

17 MARK ETHERINGTON: Do you mean the former appointment?

18 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes.

19 MARK ETHERINGTON: Okay.

20 THE CHAIRMAN: Another thing to bring both to the witness'
21 and to the wider attention is that the government has
22 declassified a paper which Mr Etherington wrote on his
23 return to the UK in 2007 and we are publishing this on
24 our website now.

25 We are also publishing the transcripts of two

1 hearings that we held in private with other junior
2 witnesses who served in Iraq between 2004 and 2009.
3 This evidence was taken in private because of the
4 relatively junior status of some of those officials at
5 the time that they served in Iraq. The majority of the
6 content of their evidence was not covered by our
7 protocols and so is made public now.

8 But for reasons of fairness, we will not be
9 questioning Mr Etherington on these transcripts this
10 morning.

11 Now, on each occasion we recognise that witnesses
12 are giving evidence based on their recollection of
13 events and we check what we hear against the papers to
14 which we have access, some of which are still coming in.

15 I remind each witness on each occasion that they
16 will later be asked to sign a transcript of the evidence
17 to the effect that the evidence given is truthful, fair
18 and accurate.

19 With those preliminaries, I'll turn to

20 Sir Martin Gilbert to open the questions. Martin?

21 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Could you tell us, when you took up
22 your post, what did you understand to be the background
23 of the founding of the PRT and what did you understand
24 its objectives to be?

25 MARK ETHERINGTON: Perhaps I could just quickly say, insofar

1 as it is helpful to you, that I was also the head of the
2 joint planning team for Afghanistan, for Helmand
3 province in November to December 2005. I know you have
4 been interested in lessons.

5 To go back to your question, Sir Martin, it wasn't
6 actually clear at the time. I had been recruited
7 in January of 2006 and I had gone over on
8 a reconnaissance in February before taking up post
9 in April 2006.

10 The TOR were -- the terms of reference -- the TOR
11 were not issued to me until my arrival in May.
12 Although, of course, I had some sense of what I was
13 going to be doing. The background to this I think had
14 been that there had been considerable American pressure
15 for the British to establish a provincial reconstruction
16 team and, as you have heard from other witnesses, this
17 of course was effectively an import by
18 Ambassador Khalilzad, the American Ambassador from
19 Afghanistan, very much an American --

20 THE CHAIRMAN: Mr Etherington, sorry, could you slow down?

21 MARK ETHERINGTON: Of course, I beg your pardon.

22 So this had been an American import and my sense at
23 the time was that it had been imposed on a rather
24 reluctant British Government. I did not get the sense
25 that this was something that they were necessarily keen

1 to do or would have done, had they been given the
2 opportunity.

3 So that really coloured much of the creation of the
4 PRT and its development because we had not necessarily
5 done the homework required to create the PRT, nor,
6 I would contend, had properly understood the
7 implications of creating this unitary approach.

8 Now, the TOR -- the terms of reference given to me,
9 the headline, I remember, was to improve the delivery of
10 UK civil and military assistance to southern Iraq.
11 Clearly, there were other bullets, but this was the key
12 one.

13 I think these sprang largely from the
14 Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit's view of what I would
15 be doing, for whom I worked at the time. That was
16 this nascent unit inside DFID which has now become the
17 Stabilisation Unit.

18 So I arrived with this sense of what I was to do.
19 I hadn't properly appreciated, I think, the reluctance
20 with which UK had embarked on this enterprise and this
21 was very much the atmosphere I found when I got there,
22 that departments had not, in the main, prepared
23 themselves to lean forward into this new organisation
24 but were rather prepared to admit it for, say,
25 presentational rather than functional reasons.

1 THE CHAIRMAN: Is that both in theatre and in London?

2 MARK ETHERINGTON: I can't say that I got that sense --

3 well, there were a couple of occasions. In my prior

4 meetings before taking up post in April, one did sense

5 a certain lack of enthusiasm, let's say, for the

6 venture, and it was made fairly clear that it was under

7 American pressure and, had I been unconscious of that,

8 I became quickly conscious of it during my

9 reconnaissance in February, where actually -- I think

10 his name was Ambassador Dan Speckhard, who had been

11 a senior -- who was a senior American officer up in

12 Baghdad, had come down in a sense to review our

13 preparations. Fortunately, I was there and was able to

14 show, presentationally, that we were committed to setting the

15 thing up.

16 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Can you tell us something about how you

17 were recruited and also about your own experience and

18 perhaps training?

19 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes, of course. Training. I'm a former

20 army officer and I left the army in 1991. I was in the

21 Parachute Regiment. I was then asked, under

22 circumstances that were not clear to me but were

23 nonetheless welcome, to take part in something called

24 the European Community Monitor Mission, or ECMM as it

25 was then, during the Yugoslav war, and I was seconded by the

1 Foreign Office to that organisation between 1992 to
2 1995, from memory. In other words, throughout the war.

3 Because of that, I was then used again in Kosovo,
4 where I was based in the Vienna Secretariat of the
5 Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe,
6 OSCE. I then went down to become the deputy head of our
7 mission in Kosovo, up to Belgrade, a few -- it goes on
8 for some time, I am afraid. So I think the point here
9 is that our experience in these theatres was quite --
10 was fairly disparate. We had not gathered it as
11 a government, I think.

12 A number of us belonged to databases all over the
13 government. I was on, I think, an FCO database, and it
14 was true of a number of people, and these databases were
15 called upon in times of difficulty. My recruitment as
16 a Governorate Coordinator - or province governor,
17 I suppose - in Iraq in 2003/2004 was through the
18 Foreign Office. I was then with the Post-Conflict
19 Reconstruction Unit, as I said, in Afghanistan and
20 latterly in Helmand.

21 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: In terms of training, was this
22 essentially what you did as province governor?

23 MARK ETHERINGTON: The training was on the job. There was
24 actually very, very little training given. I think,
25 much later, the Foreign Office launched a sort of

1 hostile environment training course which was very
2 useful, and there has been a considerable formalisation,
3 I think, of training and experience since then but, as
4 I'll argue later, I think we have some distance to go.

5 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: To whom were you reporting from Basra
6 and what was the sort of dialogue of the reporting?

7 MARK ETHERINGTON: The reporting lines were relatively
8 complex, as these things are in a coalition. My line
9 manager was Ambassador Ros Marsden, who was the
10 Consul General there. I reported to her. I had
11 a dotted line to the Cabinet Office and I had also
12 a reporting line to what was called the National
13 Co-ordination Team, the NCT, which was the American-led
14 PRT co-ordination function in Baghdad.

15 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: It was American-led?

16 MARK ETHERINGTON: American-led, yes. With, as I remember,
17 a British lieutenant colonel attached to it.

18 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: What was the PRT's intended
19 relationship with the existing British efforts in the
20 south?

21 MARK ETHERINGTON: Well, they started off awkwardly -- and
22 I should perhaps say how I found things in February when
23 I went on my reconnaissance. I was, frankly, fairly
24 shocked by what I found. I had been in Iraq for ten
25 months before, in Wasit province to the north. I had

1 driven to Basra on numerous occasions as a province
2 governor - I'll use that phrase because it is slightly more
3 descriptive than "Governorate Coordinator".

4 I found a very changed city. Security,
5 particularly, had deteriorated very substantially. To
6 give you an example, I used to drive into the city from
7 Wasit, which is some six hours north. That was now very
8 difficult to do. On this occasion, I flew into Basra by
9 helicopter. Rather tragically, that was one of the last of
10 the daylight flights because a helicopter was shot down,
11 I think, ten days later¹.

12 So the environment was a very different one, and
13 I know it sounds rather prosaic, but people weren't
14 waving anymore. One didn't get that sense of public
15 support that I felt we had once enjoyed.

16 The relationship with departments, I think, was
17 immediately coloured by the -- I think it is fair to say --
18 reluctance they had in taking part in the enterprise
19 in the first place.

20 I think there were real concerns that American
21 pressure would interfere with standing programmes, and
22 I remember one member of DFID talking about the 'tsunami
23 effect', the possible 'tsunami effect'. So we were placed
24 in a curious position. The PRT was stood up as an HMG
25 function, but the only -- the departments that could

¹ The witness subsequently clarified it was 6 May 2006.

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1 alone make the PRT function were not attached to its
2 creation.

3 So the very people who had set the PRT up were not
4 really particularly enamoured of giving it scarce
5 resources, time and money to build it up to its proper
6 state.

7 So I think it is fair to say we floundered. So when
8 I arrived in February, I detected much of this and was
9 concerned about it and, just to recap on probably the most
10 important point of that time, at that stage the
11 military headquarters had moved to the airport, so we
12 were not co-located. It was done, as I understand it --
13 and this happened before my time -- for perfectly
14 reasonable reasons, which were to lower the military
15 footprint. To make our military effort less
16 significant.

17 The effect it had, of course, in command and
18 authority terms was quite substantial, that the key
19 leaders, if you like, were no longer co-located. So
20 that was point one.

21 The second, I think, was this business of the
22 six-month tour. Now, I know this has been mentioned
23 often but, taken in aggregate, this had been hugely
24 damaging, and it was not just the military problem, it
25 was for all of us. If I can go in order a little bit,

1 in my nine months there, I worked for two heads of
2 MND South East - the Multi-National Division - three
3 Consul Generals, three heads of DFID office, two heads
4 of US office and I think two heads of Danish office.

5 Now, this is in a nine-month period. I know we have
6 talked about this before, but its effects are very, very
7 substantial - it's not just a military problem, and
8 I know it has been mentioned often in that sense.

9 I think the second thing was that the nature of the
10 effort I saw was that it resembled to me a sort of
11 archipelago, a scattered series of islands with no
12 obvious links to one another on which people were
13 working extremely hard, and I have to say - and to be very
14 honest about this - extremely bravely in many cases.

15 So these are not individual comments, they are
16 institutional and contextual comments. One did not get
17 the sense that there was a binding strategy or, to drop
18 it a level, plan for British engagement in the southeast
19 and certainly not for allied engagement in the
20 southeast. So these were my impressions. That was what
21 I saw. I was surprised and, I have to say, slightly
22 shocked, because this was three years post-manoeuvre war
23 and I had hoped that we had moved on.

24 So I came away from that reconnaissance visit in
25 pretty reflective mood and I wrote a report then, which

1 I have sent to you, which highlighted, I think, my major
2 concerns and these were basically that for the PRT to work,
3 it was an ideological formula, it was a single
4 ideological doctrine. This is what we were all going to
5 do. It was an ideological "roof" - and preferably a
6 practical one, in the sense that you had everybody under
7 one roof doing the same thing but of course, to have
8 that, you needed a plan. You needed to know what it was
9 we were doing and what it was others would do, and you
10 had to have a very, very clear sense of how it
11 interlocked.

12 By implication, of course, you also needed to have
13 a steering group who could run the plan, "own the plan" in
14 military parlance, and these things we didn't have. So
15 I felt we lacked the strategy. I was concerned that the
16 requisite homework had not been done prior to the PRT's
17 existence. Clearly, to do our job, we had in a sense to
18 supplant some activity or we risked duplication. That
19 number-crunching hadn't been done.

20 There was another issue - and this has come up only
21 tangentially and particularly with Andy Bearpark's
22 evidence which I read the other day - and that is this
23 business of what we would call Strategic Communications,
24 the business of influencing the public in theatre to
25 support your aims, to explain what it is you are trying

1 to do and what's going to happen.

2 This, to me, had been wholly neglected, inexplicably
3 neglected. I just didn't get a sense we had had
4 a serious stab at this. So I mentioned this in my
5 report too.

6 I think there were also clear risks. One was
7 already happening in a sense. It was the erosion of
8 consent in Basra and it was a peculiarly Basra-centric
9 problem. I remember the other provinces did not suffer
10 from this so much, apart from perhaps Maysan.

11 So there was this sense that we were perhaps missing
12 key bits, consent was eroding. I thought there was
13 a risk also that we wouldn't resource the PRT, given the
14 mood music I had heard and I did feel that
15 a poorly-resourced PRT was probably worse than no PRT at
16 all.

17 I want to explain that slightly curious comment:
18 a PRT functions because you gather all of the
19 moving parts together in a single template - and of
20 course, the edges of that template flex - but what you
21 are also gathering is half a dozen contractual schemes,
22 half a dozen leave schemes, half a dozen different
23 cultures, three or four different nationalities,
24 different transport, different security schemes. So
25 unless you have worked that through in advance, you are

1 left with actually an aggregation of weakness rather
2 than strength, and these were the points I made at the
3 time. I'm not sure how widely that document was
4 distributed - nor what the uptake was - but that takes us
5 through my early session.

6 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: In terms of resources, can you tell us,
7 when you arrived, what -- I mean both human and
8 financial -- resources were at your disposal and what
9 you were able to do to either enhance or expand those?

10 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes. I arrived in April, as I had said.
11 We were given a magnificent building and all credit to
12 the Foreign Office for the work they had put into that.
13 Not easy in a narrow compound to do this sort of thing.

14 The resources -- in a way we had a head start. What
15 the PRT did in a sense was rebranding. We took existing
16 effort and called it the PRT.

17 Now, there are advantages to that, of course. One
18 was on the ground very quickly. You gathered, to my
19 great satisfaction, a number of extremely experienced
20 people. People who simply walked from one office to the
21 other, if you like.

22 So it meant that, in presentational terms, we were
23 up and running pretty quickly and I felt we had a very
24 experienced team and one capable of discharging its
25 responsibilities, which nonetheless remained fairly

1 opaque at the time.

2 We had three or four Danes, from memory, who had
3 come across from the Danish office. There was
4 an agricultural expert and some police experts. We
5 inherited, though much, much later, DFID's governance
6 and capacity building team which had been placed there
7 in the consulate. So we gathered in those disparate
8 elements -- if I can use that without being
9 pejorative -- from existing effort.

10 Now, the downsides of this: I think I have described
11 that you are also importing the danger of not starting
12 and training a team ab initio, of course, and it means
13 that you are inheriting all of these different cultures
14 and working practices. So it is quite difficult to
15 rebrand, if you like, substantively and set them on
16 a new path.

17 Now, in terms of funding, as I remember, departments
18 had given us, I think, a total of £350,000 start-up
19 costs which were largely administrative. We later, much
20 later in the year, gathered, I think, the rump of the
21 governance and capacity building fund that DFID had had,
22 which I think was £190,000. But these were relatively
23 small amounts of money.

24 The big money, so to speak, wasn't available at the
25 time. In prospect was "ESF" and, forgive me, I can't

1 remember -- economic stabilisation funds², I believe - were
2 American. We were originally granted 15 million by the
3 National Co-ordination Team in Baghdad. I immediately
4 put in a bid saying that, because we were Basra, a large
5 city, that I didn't think the money should be divided
6 pro rata, I thought -- you know, divided between 15 PRTs
7 in that manner -- I felt that it should be divided
8 according to our³size, and we got, in the end,
9 40 million.

10 The point about this money, though, is it had
11 a very, very long glide path, if you like. So it had
12 been thought about in April/May but we didn't actually
13 see any of it, I think, until autumn. So actually what
14 we had, looking back on it, were some fairly immediate
15 problems and they weren't easy to dispose of. We had
16 people -- and so we could make a fist of it. They were
17 good people. We had a building.

18 What we didn't have, as I said, was really an
19 overarching strategy in which to plug. Rather, we were
20 asked to create one by the National Co-ordination
21 Team -- and, again, I have sent you some rather
22 voluminous documents -- but that consisted of assessing
23 where we were and planning where we wanted to go.

24 Our difficulty at this time was combining that with
25 British efforts of the time. We didn't really have any

² The witness has subsequently clarified it is Economic Support Funds.

³ Our refers to "Basra".

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1 funding, not proper, solid funding. So this was --
2 these problems, I sense -- they were in a sense obscured
3 in the sort of typical minutiae of the day, as we moved
4 into our building and got staff behind us and got
5 computers linked up, but once we were there, these
6 rather more pressing problems became clearer and impeded
7 us.

8 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: My last questions concern the
9 timeframe. For how long were you told that the PRT
10 would exist and how far did that shape your thought
11 about the work and, in particular, your relationship
12 with your Iraqi interlocutors and how they regarded it?

13 MARK ETHERINGTON: I think my memories are that my first
14 contract was pretty short. I think it was a matter of
15 months. But the NCT's vision for the PRT was two years
16 and I remember that's the work plan we had to produce.

17 So I think there was this -- from the beginning,
18 this at least implied divergence which became
19 substantive divergence, and I think what happened is that
20 this divergence, the boundary lines, became rather
21 turbulent as time wore on, because I didn't get the
22 sense at the time -- we can talk a little bit more about
23 this later -- one didn't get the impression that the UK
24 was committed to the long-term in Iraq. You did get the
25 impression that the Americans were; and the two-year work

1 programme was at least evidence of that.

2 So my memories are of staffing being a recurrent
3 difficulty. For a brief period of time, in fact for
4 about two to three months, I think, there was governance
5 work going on in Multi-National Division South East,
6 which I'll abbreviate to MND South East, if I may.
7 There was governance work, of course, going on in DFID
8 and being led by DFID in the consulate building and we
9 had just been set up to do a governance strand too.

10 There was infrastructure and economic work going on
11 in MND South East, and infrastructure and economic work
12 going on in DFID; the same with us. Rule of law was
13 divided between MND South East and the Foreign Office,
14 and was a co-ordination role we later took on.

15 The point I'm making here is that, where we were
16 designed to simplify, we actually complicated,
17 I suspect, and the lines of operation became very messy.
18 It wasn't at all clear who had the lead for doing what
19 and I was surprised by that at that juncture, that very,
20 very difficult juncture post-war.

21 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: The impact on this on your Iraqi
22 interlocutors?

23 MARK ETHERINGTON: I have to say we didn't see an awful lot
24 of the Iraqis at that time. I know it sounds an
25 extraordinary thing to say. I remember it from my time

1 at the back end of -- sort of mid-2004 in Iraq, that
2 I used to spend days, hours, weeks, on the road with
3 Iraqis, nothing else. The security deterioration put
4 paid to much of that.

5 In Basra at the time, it was very difficult to go
6 and see Iraqis. It was done. It was always
7 a deliberate enterprise and carefully thought through.
8 We had interpreters who came in but, in the end, they
9 stopped. An interpreter, I remember was shot, in the
10 consulate -- a consulate interpreter was shot.

11 So interaction with Iraqis was very difficult. It
12 took place in, as I say, rather deliberate chunks. In
13 the early days, Iraqis would come in to the consulate.
14 Later on I think they found it rather hazardous
15 because, of course, they were seen coming in - and we
16 would have sort of set-piece discussions on, perhaps,
17 infrastructure or working groups on governance and this
18 sort of thing, and the governance team particularly
19 gathered Iraqis outside the country at intervals.

20 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Thank you very much.

21 THE CHAIRMAN: We need to get on. Over to you, Roderic.

22 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you. We have now in evidence, and
23 declassified, this report that you wrote in March 2007,
24 so I don't think we need repeat anything that's in it.
25 It is a very useful bit of evidence and you have picked

1 up a number of those points already. So what I would
2 just like to do is check off, so that we are clear, just
3 one or two questions that arise from it.

4 I mean, firstly, you have already referred to
5 absence of leadership. Where was leadership coming from
6 in the collective British effort in the southeast of
7 Iraq at this time or where should it have been coming
8 from?

9 MARK ETHERINGTON: It is curious that Britain itself was
10 missing from Iraq. That was my sense. Instead --
11 I must explain that -- instead I saw departments and
12 I saw departmental views --

13 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So you can't identify somebody who was
14 the clear lead figure on the British effort -- in
15 theatre for starters?

16 MARK ETHERINGTON: I think, to answer your question directly -
17 we had a Consul General who, of course, for the majority
18 of my time was Rosalind Marsden and she was in charge of
19 the consulate. If one took a helicopter ride to the
20 division and walked into the Divisional Headquarters,
21 the minute I entered the door, the general was in charge
22 of the headquarters and, as an officer once said to me,
23 "There can only ever be one general".

24 In DFID's office, clearly the authority rested with
25 DFID to implement its programmes.

1 SIR RODERIC LYNE: You said earlier that you were reporting
2 to the Consul General.

3 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes.

4 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So, for civilian affairs, was it clear
5 that the Consul General was our leader, our authority,
6 our leader in southeast Iraq?

7 MARK ETHERINGTON: I don't think it was, no.

8 SIR RODERIC LYNE: You didn't have a clear line of
9 authority?

10 MARK ETHERINGTON: I don't think it was clear. It was
11 rather consensual and very personality dependent.
12 I think some of the generals whom I saw felt a lead role
13 was appropriate. Other generals whom I saw felt perhaps
14 that a role in support of the civil mission, so to
15 speak, was more appropriate.

16 So I think one of the difficulties was that there
17 was no clear sense of leadership. Indeed, we
18 managed to establish -- and it is something we pushed
19 very hard for -- the southern Iraq steering group -
20 although we called it the Basra steering group when we
21 first asked the Cabinet Office about it. The general
22 and the Consul General co-chaired.

23 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Yes.

24 MARK ETHERINGTON: So I think this business of leadership is
25 important allied to the business of the plan. So there

1 wasn't a single plan, and I think one can get too hung
2 up on this but there wasn't a single construct that set
3 out our destinations clearly, and there wasn't a single
4 owner of that construct whose job it was to deliver that
5 plan.

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: We had already been there three years.

7 I want to come back to the plan in a second.

8 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes.

9 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Just tracing leadership back to
10 Whitehall, from your perspective of head of the PRT, who
11 in Whitehall was leading the effort?

12 MARK ETHERINGTON: I personally felt that no one was and
13 I'll say why: here we were, three years post-war. Now,
14 in reading some of your transcripts, I read that Iraq
15 was a "top strategic priority" for the Prime Minister,
16 that there was a "strong drive" to deliver. I saw no
17 evidence of that at all.

18 SIR RODERIC LYNE: You say you had a dotted line to the
19 Cabinet Office.

20 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes, and I would like to explain that to
21 you, just to complete that point. So here we are, three
22 years post-manoeuvre war, in an environment where there
23 is a strong drive to deliver the top strategic priority -
24 and there is no plan and there is no obvious leader.

25 I think I found that surprising. I still do,

1 actually.

2 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But the Cabinet Office is the

3 co-ordinating body within Whitehall. You had a dotted

4 line to them. If you wanted guidance, instruction

5 a decision from Whitehall, how did you go about getting

6 it? Did you send a message to the Cabinet Office, to

7 a particular official there, or did you go through the

8 Consul General saying "Can you, as it were, get

9 authority for this, that or the other?" How, in

10 practical terms, did you do it?

11 MARK ETHERINGTON: I would like to go back one remove if

12 I may and I learned a lot, of course, from my original

13 time in Iraq and from all of the jobs I have described,

14 probably at tedious length, before it. When I went to

15 do the planning for Helmand with my team --

16 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Can we not go back too many removes?

17 MARK ETHERINGTON: No, I just want to say that the thing

18 that made it work was this business of having

19 Cabinet Office support. The thing that in a sense got

20 departments to cooperate was that business of having

21 a Cabinet Office mandate. I remembered that and I think

22 the PCRU remembered it too, because, of course, I had

23 worked for them at the time.

24 Now I'll come back to Iraq. We were terribly keen

25 - because we thought the PRT was going to be a turbulent

1 old business - we were very keen to retain that dotted
2 line to the Cabinet Office. So we could try to
3 intercede where we could. So, to answer your question,
4 we had talked to the Cabinet Office before we went and
5 I think I spoke to Sophia Willits-King -- I think that's
6 the name -- and it was to the Cabinet Office we turned
7 in May⁴ to try to resolve some of these issues, and
8 I wrote a document - that I have sent to you - for a meeting
9 on 22 May in London to deal with many of the issues
10 outlined in the report.

11 So that's how we did it. Was I clear at the time to
12 whom I was addressing these requests? No. And my
13 memory of this is of an apparently -- a very -- a very
14 large number of VIPs coming into Basra with aides and
15 their pencils would smoke, you know, as one was saying,
16 "There are just three things" or "There are just these
17 four things". I don't remember much of that coming to
18 anything.

19 So my impression -- and it is as strong now as it
20 was at the time, I think -- was that we just lacked that
21 locus in the centre of government in which to plug-in
22 complex cross-governmental stabilisation enterprises
23 like this one.

24 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Turning now to the absence of a strategy,
25 the absence of a plan, what did you do about this to

⁴ 2006.

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1 fill that gap and can you tell us about the Better Basra
2 plan?

3 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes. I said what my impressions were in
4 my reconnaissance, and it wasn't much more than 20 days
5 after my arrival in April that I felt that, you know,
6 there were some substantive problems here that weren't
7 easily going to be sorted out. These are listed in my
8 lessons learned paper, and actually were initially listed
9 in this Cabinet Office paper which you have.

10 I felt that what we should have done is to say,
11 "Right, we are going to form this PRT, it is going to
12 have responsibility, or at least co-ordination
13 responsibility, for some fairly complex strands,
14 governance, rule of law, economics, infrastructure", and
15 we needed, therefore, to look at where we were doing
16 those things and decide who is going to do them to make
17 sure we are not tripping over each other.

18 As I said, that wasn't done, and for a couple of
19 months, I think, this three-team system, duplicating not
20 in one layer, but in two, persisted. So I think at this
21 time I had sort of characterised myself as the
22 Ancient Mariner. I ran from office to office saying
23 "Surely we have to see --

24 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Did the Ancient Mariner manage to get
25 a plan put together?

1 MARK ETHERINGTON: No one said "Unhand me, grey beard loon" -
2 but I think they were thinking it - and I suspect that. We
3 were doing our planning all the time. We were
4 fulfilling what's called the requirement to plan for the
5 National Co-ordination Team, and this was very sequenced
6 and carefully laid out. There was training, an initial
7 acquaintance with documentation which took us to an
8 interim operating capability. We then had to do
9 a baseline assessment of Basra across all lines of
10 operation. We needed to grade them in colour terms.
11 I needed to write a cover document. You have all of
12 this and I am afraid they are rather long. So it is
13 pretty substantive stuff, right or wrong.

14 The difficulty we had was that we couldn't lock it
15 in easily with British effort because that British
16 effort had not been defined and leadership was not
17 defined. So we didn't even have, I suspect, an entity
18 with which to interlock.

19 SIR RODERIC LYNE: The Prime Minister came out soon after
20 you had arrived, May 2006. This process of trying to
21 work towards a plan presumably was underway. As
22 a result of that visit, were we then able to achieve
23 some kind of united set of objectives and work towards
24 them in a more coherent way?

25 MARK ETHERINGTON: I think we achieved a measure of

1 coherence and I put it no more strongly than that. It
2 took a while to work these things through.

3 Better Basra, I think, had three iterations, if
4 my memory serves me right, some of them after my time,
5 and Better Basra, ran, if I remember --

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: When was the first iteration?

7 MARK ETHERINGTON: I think Better Basra began 25 May 2006.
8 That's when I think I first saw the paper.

9 SIR RODERIC LYNE: You saw it, but had you helped to write
10 it?

11 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes, absolutely. We had, I think, quite
12 a substantial influence on it --

13 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So we had a plan from this point?

14 MARK ETHERINGTON: No, we didn't have a plan. What we had
15 was the desire for one, and there is a huge difference
16 and I suspect this is a long-running thing --

17 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So (overtalking) objectives Better Basra,
18 not an actual plan?

19 MARK ETHERINGTON: We had a set of aspirations and I think
20 this, if you don't mind me saying so, cuts to the heart
21 of the chase of much of what you have heard. We had
22 lots of aspirations and we are told that it was a great
23 priority. What we lacked were delivery systems, and I
24 think this factor haunted us throughout our time there.
25 Now, my understanding is we didn't have a joint

1 plan, by which I mean a civil/military plan with the
2 Division alongside us, until 2008. So the facts are
3 that, since the manoeuvre war in 2003, for five years,
4 Britain subsisted, of course, without a joint plan.

5 SIR RODERIC LYNE: A very strong theme in a document you
6 wrote in March 2007, which again you have reiterated
7 today, is the disease of departmentalitis, of different
8 departments pursuing their own agendas, and yet, at the
9 same time, you said it was an important objective of the
10 British Government to succeed in this enterprise.

11 How should we have made sure that the different bits
12 of British Government were joining up in theatre to
13 achieve the success we wanted, these aspirations?

14 MARK ETHERINGTON: I have talked about the "archipelago" and
15 I would like to reiterate that I met many able and very
16 brave individuals. The difficulty was that we lacked
17 the synergies that that activity should properly have
18 produced. So we lacked a binding plan and, as I say, it
19 wasn't until 2008, as I understand it, that the
20 MND South East and the civil components had a joint
21 plan.

22 We -- I think it took a considerable amount of time
23 to get there. How could we have got there sooner? In
24 my own view, there would have been -- there is no
25 substitute for a clear locus in Whitehall for

1 responsibility, a door with "Iraq" on it. Cross-cutting
2 Iraq, delivering the Iraq project, if you like.

3 In my view, that should have been matched by a clear
4 locus in southeastern Iraq.

5 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But once the PRT had been invented and
6 you were in charge of it, hadn't, at that point -- even
7 if it was not invented here, it was invented by
8 Ambassador Khalilzad and imported, nevertheless, hadn't,
9 at this point, a mechanism for delivery been set up with
10 you in charge?

11 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes.

12 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So were you able to drive that forward?

13 MARK ETHERINGTON: No, because the mechanism was not
14 autonomous, of course. It depended on departmental
15 input. So, for example, all of our staff, the
16 pre-dominant numbers of UK staff, certainly the
17 technical expertise had to come from DFID.

18 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So, if you weren't getting the input you
19 needed, what were you, as the boss, doing about it?

20 MARK ETHERINGTON: Making myself fairly unpopular, I should
21 imagine. I was a demandeur for many months. It is on
22 record. I tried very hard, and you have some of the
23 documents that I wrote at the time about it. I sensed,
24 and my experience led me to believe, that we simply
25 hadn't done our homework.

1 I understand that others may differ from me, but
2 I came at this with quite a few months in Iraq anyway,
3 which doesn't necessarily, of course, mean that I know
4 everything, but it does give me a sense of perhaps where
5 we might have been. I felt that we had struggled from
6 the outset to position ourselves properly, largely
7 because I didn't think our partners were behind us:

8 DFID did not transfer their governance people into
9 our team until July 31st and I arrived on April 24th.
10 So for three months we maintained some of these
11 duplicated structures. I think there was always
12 a tension about the PRT itself - what was it for? Was it
13 a British instrument to deliver short-term effect
14 alongside MND South East or was it a long-term capacity
15 building instrument, semi-autonomous because it had to
16 be in a sense --

17 SIR RODERIC LYNE: What did you think it was there for?

18 MARK ETHERINGTON: I thought it was the latter; in other
19 words, the two-year programme, and I'll tell you
20 I thought it was that because of the National
21 Co-ordination Team work programme - to which, of course,
22 the UK had signed up - and I think, if I can speak
23 a little more personally, I also felt we owed it to the
24 Iraqis to be there for that period of time. I had seen
25 at first hand, the damage, the dislocation, the

1 extraordinary suffering in Wasit and I really felt,
2 having, of course, left early because of the November
3 Agreement in 2003, having left early - on sovereignty -
4 I felt that we owed it to them to put in this capacity-
5 building, and make sure that they were as prepared as
6 they could be.

7 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Last question from me: you, as you said,
8 have served in the army, you are an ex-army officer and
9 a very important bit of the effort. The most important
10 bit of the effort, numerically and in terms of
11 resources, that we had in Iraq was, of course, our
12 military command in MND South East.

13 How effective a relationship were you able to
14 perform with our military commanders and were you able
15 to leverage that to achieve the objectives of the PRT?

16 MARK ETHERINGTON: It varied, of course. I think
17 General Cooper and I did not see much of one another.
18 This was in the early stages. I think General Shirreff
19 arrived in July or something of that order. I had seen
20 enough by that period to buttonhole General Shirreff on
21 his reconnaissance visit and, by pure coincidence,
22 I knew him a little from past military life, and I said
23 to him more or less what I said to you, "I sense that we
24 just don't have a plan, we have just got - together - to
25 create something" and I said I was very worried by the

1 lack of civil/military - it is not liaison, it is
2 integration, absolute integration. We needed to be in
3 lock step with one another.

4 We agreed, I think, on much. We had hatched a plan
5 to move some of his headquarters back into Basra, which
6 was to be called Chief of Staff (Forward), if I remember
7 rightly, which would enable us to recreate that
8 civil/military structure I felt that we had disposed of -
9 although at the time, of course, not consciously and for
10 good reasons - but now was really coming back to haunt
11 us. So we agreed on that.

12 When General Shirreff arrived - and I remember clearly
13 the briefing he gave us - his assessment was that, you
14 know, we were stalled in Basra, that we were running to
15 stand still -- I paraphrase him -- there were not simply
16 ambushes taking place in Basra, but I remember him
17 describing full conventional warfare in built-up areas.
18 A patrol might go out and be ambushed in to Basra and
19 then be ambushed on the way back again.

20 So these were serious times, and he and I both
21 wanted -- I hardly equate my effort with his - - but I
22 think we both wanted in our way to make sure that our
23 bits functioned. So we had this plan. When he came
24 back he gave this briefing and he outlined what became
25 Operation Salamanca, which was a robust, and what the

1 military would call a kinetic, plan to take on the
2 militias.

3 Now, for reasons that you will be familiar with,
4 that didn't run with Prime Minister Maliki, and the plan
5 was quickly rehatched as a sort of short-term capacity
6 building plan. In its former guise, of course, it was
7 everything we had hoped for. We were very substantially
8 constrained by the security situation, and so any idea
9 that the militia was to be taken on in this way was
10 welcome to us. You have to have security for
11 development.

12 I didn't see myself as a Lincolnshire bomber
13 squadron commander sending people out to do governance
14 meetings - this was dangerous stuff. I knew the
15 Jaysh Al Mahdi well. They had attacked my compound
16 in '04. We had had a couple of close shaves with them,
17 so they are pretty effective.

18 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Thank you. I think my colleagues will
19 want to come back on security later, but over from me.

20 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: You have touched on most of the
21 areas I was going to ask in some detail, but what
22 I would like to hear, first of all, is if you can
23 describe what are the main strands of your own work with
24 the PRT?

25 MARK ETHERINGTON: We were given by the National

1 Co-ordination Team -- and, indeed, that template
2 sufficed, I think, for pretty much everyone's effort --
3 a governance stream, a rule of law stream, an
4 infrastructure stream and a economy stream and how one
5 mixes those up and combines them is, of course, largely
6 a matter for those doing it.

7 Of those, the governance stream was the most
8 developed, and it was the most developed because DFID had
9 done a great deal of valuable work on it before our
10 arrival. So in this sense particularly, that stream was
11 by no means complete, but it was at least a material
12 process.

13 Economics and infrastructure, I think, had suffered.
14 I didn't get the sense there was a large body of work --
15 sorry, economics had suffered. I didn't get the sense
16 there was a large body of work there. In infrastructure
17 terms, again DFID had done quite a lot.

18 The rule of law, again, had been done in a number of
19 separate streams. As I remember it, the Foreign Office
20 were responsible for prisons and police, MND South East
21 was also responsible for some aspects of police
22 training. The mentoring, I think, fell to our side. So
23 over these months that Sir Roderic has asked about, we
24 were gathering these streams together, trying to staff
25 the PRT and, to answer your question directly - there is

1 a great deal of material in the documents I have sent
2 you and the work programme was pretty complex - but, in
3 summary, the business in governance was trying to get
4 the Province Council to function in a way that could run
5 the city and, at the time, even picking up the rubbish
6 was a function we tried to look at.

7 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: When you got there, what were the
8 gaps in the staffing capability that you had? Did you
9 identify the gaps and how did you go about getting them?

10 MARK ETHERINGTON: In our capability, they were numerous.
11 We settled on a figure, I think, of about 35, as all-up
12 strength in the PRT, but in retrospect this was well
13 below what we needed.

14 The reason is, of course, that 35 is not a static
15 figure. I have said that we had different leave
16 contracts. We had four of them. There were enormous
17 frictions attached to daily operation, and let me give
18 you an example.

19 I said that security arrangements had not been
20 deconflicted. I couldn't ride on a convoy with my
21 military deputy. His rules were different to mine. He
22 clearly couldn't ride with me. Neither of us could ride
23 with our American deputy and he couldn't ride with
24 either of us.

25 So the picture I suppose I'm trying to give you is

1 an accretion of relatively small problems that, taken
2 together: the lack of plan, the lack of leadership, the
3 conflicting security requirements, the business of
4 money, the business of staffing, departmental -- lack of
5 departmental commitment to the plan, together built up
6 to a very substantial problem, that dramatically impeded
7 our work.

8 To answer your question directly, on each of these
9 work strands, we assembled a working group that would
10 then take a baseline of where we stood in these given
11 sectors and then create -- and this was not just
12 a British affair, this was with our allies -- with our
13 Iraqi colleagues, too, whenever we could see them --
14 a work programme and that's what's detailed in that
15 document.

16 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But with the Stabilisation Unit, do
17 you believe that the UK was developing the sort of
18 necessary post-conflict expertise in such ventures or
19 not?

20 MARK ETHERINGTON: At the time, that expertise was very much
21 nascent. The Helmand planning activity that I had been
22 part of was the first of its excursions and that was
23 in November 2005. We are just talking now
24 about April 2006. So really this was, in a sense, its
25 second outing, I suppose, in these terms.

1 So we were very much about building up experience at
2 the time. I don't think that experience was
3 particularly present in government -- our government.
4 I don't think it was present at the centre and I suspect
5 that may be the reason for some of these difficulties
6 for us.

7 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: You have mentioned earlier about the
8 question of lack of resources --

9 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes.

10 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: -- but how did you spend the
11 resources that you did have? What priority did you give
12 to resources at your disposal?

13 MARK ETHERINGTON: Well, the start-up fund that we received,
14 the £350,000 fund which was tri-departmental, was spent
15 on administrative issues, it was spent on sort of
16 photocopiers and rooms and all the administrative detail
17 one would expect in moving into a headquarters.

18 The economic stabilisation - 'Economic Support Fund',
19 I think, was that 'ESF' acronym -- was of course, spent on
20 Iraq, or we attempted to spend it on Iraq. Of course,
21 it was very difficult to operate at the time. We would
22 offer it up to the council for agreed infrastructure
23 projects and the aim then was to make sure that the
24 Council handled that money, disbursed it properly,
25 accounted for it properly and that the projects were

1 worthwhile, and we established a panel for that. The
2 governance fund that we got from DFID, or the rump, was
3 used to run governance conferences, which typically
4 would talk through stages of a financial development
5 strategy for the Province Council. There would be
6 tutorials, if you like, on how to spend the money, how
7 to disperse it, how to account for it, as I have said.

8 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So you had discretion locally in
9 terms of how you could use the resources you had at your
10 disposal?

11 MARK ETHERINGTON: Not entirely. Understandably, we were
12 asked to go back to DFID on their money, and on the ESF
13 funds we had to go back to Baghdad.

14 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: You mentioned that of course you are
15 working with the coalition.

16 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes.

17 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: What's your experience of working
18 with a coalition and what lessons would you draw from
19 working with the coalition and were there challenges
20 there?

21 MARK ETHERINGTON: There are always challenges in any
22 coalition. I'm not sure that I could add to the body of
23 lessons that others who have worked more recently in
24 Afghanistan, for example, have provided.

25 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: But was there a shared understanding

1 among the coalition partners of what the PRT was there
2 for?

3 MARK ETHERINGTON: No, I don't think that was the case.

4 I think the American vision of PRTs was laid out pretty
5 clearly. They saw it is a long-term capacity building
6 venture centrally co-ordinated. I don't think that was
7 a vision shared by us and we have described that.

8 A word on the Americans, I suppose, from what I saw,
9 is that -- and I long ago worked for an American company
10 and I feel I know them reasonably well -- they do come
11 at the thing with an extraordinary sense of mission. We
12 are talking about six-month tours now in 2006; my
13 American colleague, in 2004, had done 17 months in Iraq.
14 Admittedly, some of that was owing to an emergency, but
15 he had routinely done a 13-month tour and had four
16 months added to it.

17 Many of the American officers I met on my first time
18 round were still there on my second. So there was a
19 difference in Iraq terms -- and I don't know if this is
20 the same in Afghanistan -- between our approaches,
21 I suppose. Americans, as I say, have a very, very clear
22 sense of mission and the need to get it right. Every
23 time I saw them come across a problem in the PRT, they
24 simply added the length of time to their tenure to get
25 it right.

1 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So how did you ensure cohesion
2 within your team?

3 MARK ETHERINGTON: That bit wasn't too hard. The person who
4 ran the NCT at the time was a colleague of mine from
5 2003/2004. We had been Governorate Co-ordinators together
6 in south central region. So we knew one another. I had
7 also taken the chance to see them in Washington before
8 I went. So I felt we had quite a close relationship.

9 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you.

10 THE CHAIRMAN: Right. Change of tack and on to the security
11 end. Lawrence?

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: You have described how much things
13 had deteriorated from the time you had last been to the
14 time you arrived, and obviously we have heard a lot
15 about the deterioration in the security situation. You
16 have also indicated how few Iraqis you were able to see
17 over this period and the reasons why.

18 Did you feel you had any understanding at this time
19 of what was going on on the Basra street?

20 MARK ETHERINGTON: I think it was very limited, if we are
21 honest with one another. I remember those days
22 particularly, I think, as sort of giving Powerpoint
23 briefs to one another in air-conditioned rooms with no
24 Iraqis present. We were conscious of it. We saw them
25 as often as we could and it has to be said, of course,

1 that, in inviting an Iraqi to come to you, you are also
2 placing him or her at some risk. So we were conscious
3 of our responsibilities there too.

4 When we were out of the country -- and I remember we
5 invited a group of them to Kuwait, they were also
6 invited to Jordan, and we found that we were able to
7 have really good, substantive discussions. But I think
8 the casualty of the security situation was very much
9 this local awareness.

10 Now, the military, of course, would feed us
11 information from what they had gleaned on patrol, but
12 I don't think we should kid ourselves that we had
13 a particularly clear view of what was happening on the
14 street, no.

15 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Was it possible to make any progress
16 on the PRT's work, given the security situation?

17 MARK ETHERINGTON: I remember it as a very, very hard slog.

18 I think governance made some progress. As I said, it
19 was set up before we arrived and it was able to
20 capitalise on that momentum. I think we made slow
21 progress with infrastructure. Rule of law, I think,
22 benefited from a sort of unitary view among us, even if
23 we weren't able to make very much progress on it.

24 I remember supporting the main courthouse and the judges
25 in Basra.

1 We -- I don't think we made startling progress, no,
2 and it was very frustrating of course, but this security
3 situation is hard to describe, I think, to people who
4 haven't experienced it. It had an enormous effect on
5 development activity.

6 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Did you have any confidence in what
7 might be done to improve it? You mentioned Salamanca,
8 before that turned into Sinbad, there were these pulses,
9 operation.

10 MARK ETHERINGTON: I think when General Shirreff briefed
11 on Salamanca, it was very welcome, and we talked about
12 the Americans briefly. I remember the American head of
13 office sitting at the table looking visibly relieved.
14 Now, of course, the Americans had graded, if I remember
15 this rightly -- I have tried to follow this up and find
16 the origin -- had graded us as a "Red" city. There
17 were ten "Red" cities in Iraq at the time and Basra was
18 one of them in American parlance.

19 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: "Red" doesn't sound good.

20 MARK ETHERINGTON: It wasn't good, no, so there were ten
21 sort of crisis cities, if you like. Clearly there was
22 a bit of Schadenfreude there too, because we had at
23 least given the impression, however unwittingly, that
24 Basra was going pretty well in the early days and that
25 we had a feel for these things. So I think the feeling

1 was at the time that it needed to be tackled.

2 General Shirreff briefed on Salamanca and that
3 seemed to be what was required, and I think everyone
4 agreed it was required. I personally, at the time, had
5 my doubts that it would succeed in the way it was outlined
6 because it is very, very difficult to tackle an
7 insurgency like this, and they clearly had a measure of
8 public support - although I wouldn't exaggerate that.

9 The difficulty came in Prime Minister Maliki's
10 reactions. So of course, Salamanca had to transmute
11 very quickly into a capacity building operation, which
12 it was never designed to be and, ironically, it
13 supplanted the very capacity-building development it was
14 first designed to enable, I suppose.

15 So, of course, we didn't get that security effect -
16 and the security environment continued to deteriorate
17 is my understanding.

18 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: In November, the Foreign Secretary
19 decided civilian staff should relocate to Kuwait.

20 MARK ETHERINGTON: Yes.

21 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Were you in favour of that move?

22 MARK ETHERINGTON: That was a very controversial decision,
23 and the military particularly were pretty angry about
24 it. I have to take full responsibility for, I think,
25 raising the issue. I don't know what led the Foreign

1 Secretary to take that decision then, but I had become
2 very concerned about the safety of our staff and I did
3 not feel that the constant mortaring, the risks of going
4 outside, were in any way conducive to the development we
5 sought.

6 I had also long suspected we should have been at the
7 airport anyway. The only reason I didn't raise this
8 more fully at the time was because the consulate was in
9 the middle and I thought we had to be there. But there
10 were many arguments to have had us with the military
11 from the very beginning.

12 So the Foreign Secretary took that decision.
13 I think the speed with which the operation was carried
14 out is something I did not favour. We were moved in
15 a matter of hours in some cases and I think a maximum of
16 three days at most. It created an enormous amount of
17 difficulty for us.

18 So I agreed with the sentiment. I thought something
19 had to be done and I agreed that we should be moved if
20 the situation went on that way. But I did not agree
21 with the speed with which it was carried out and the
22 date on which it was carried out.

23 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Once there, could you remain
24 effective? Was there much you could do?

25 MARK ETHERINGTON: I don't think we were that effective

1 before we left, frankly, if I'm honest. We were able to
2 do something and I think we were able to keep an eye on
3 the things we had begun, and we flew people into the
4 airport, remembering at the time, of course, that hard
5 cover was supposed to be the minimum requirement for our
6 staff and there wasn't any at the airport. So I think
7 the risks were quite clear.

8 I'm very conscious, as I say this, that the military
9 were running far greater risks than us; they did not
10 have the benefit of hard accommodation. But I felt
11 that -- I felt I had a duty to my civilian staff. That
12 was my view at the time. I'm happy to be condemned for
13 it.

14 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think that's all I have.

15 THE CHAIRMAN: You have given us a very candid set of
16 responses to our questions, for which we are grateful.
17 You said at one point that no PRT might have been better
18 than a really ineffectual one. Looking back on the time
19 of its existence, would no PRT have been better than the
20 one we actually had and what it achieved, was able to
21 do?

22 MARK ETHERINGTON: I think there was a period of time
23 between, I would say, April and October that was pretty
24 difficult, for all the administrative reasons I have
25 outlined - and almost, I have to say, comically difficult

1 on occasion, trying to gather these disparate convoys.
2 We were helped considerably by the Foreign Office, who
3 in the end, I think in August, some time later, declared
4 that we should be treated as Foreign Office, all of us,
5 and that was an important point because it was either
6 Dane or American, or, you know --

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Is this August 2006?

8 MARK ETHERINGTON: August 2006, and at that time things
9 became a lot more easy for us. So when we went into
10 transit accommodation at the airport, of course, we were
11 treated all as British members of the Foreign Office.
12 So that helped us a lot.

13 But what I have to say is we had to break trail on
14 these tremendously difficult administrative
15 arrangements. But we did manage to do it slowly, not
16 nearly as quickly as we should, and I think what we
17 managed to do, dare I say it, is demonstrate a degree of
18 utility by summer -- that we demonstrated, I think --
19 and this comes back to Sir Roderic's question on Better
20 Basra.

21 Better Basra was a set of aspirations, and we were
22 able, by simply being, to gather some of the strands of
23 Better Basra, to make suggestions about how it should be
24 run, to provide a repository in Basra Palace to run
25 them.

1 So I say this because I think the PRT suffered
2 enormous administrative difficulties. We gradually, and
3 very painfully, began to sort those out. We began to
4 demonstrate some utility, I think, to all parties
5 in August/September, but regrettably the security
6 environment was deteriorating at such a rate that it was
7 very difficult to make the advances that we were now
8 suited to carry out.

9 THE CHAIRMAN: You have referred already, as you do in your
10 statements and reports, to the top level aspirations of
11 the work of Basra for the southeast, but at the same
12 time you tell us, I think, that the departmental
13 expectations were pretty low, and semi-detached, even.

14 Was there disappointment? Did it come through,
15 either from the highest levels of political leadership
16 or indeed from departmental colleagues, who said, "Oh,
17 what a shame"?

18 MARK ETHERINGTON: Sorry, a shame about what, Sir John?

19 THE CHAIRMAN: A shame that it didn't manage to work better?

20 MARK ETHERINGTON: I think the irony is, I suspect, that,
21 launched in fairly unfavourable circumstances, we were
22 able to some extent to prove the concept, and of course
23 we have one now in Afghanistan.

24 THE CHAIRMAN: I want to pursue that in a minute.

25 MARK ETHERINGTON: What that meant, I think, is that more

1 was expected of us at the end than at the beginning, and
2 so I think, in demonstrating that utility, the
3 departments did have some attachment to it after that,
4 and saw it as a sensible vehicle to realise our aims.

5 The reason I say this is because I expect this came
6 back to bite us to some extent, because up until that
7 time we had, as I say, been predominantly pursuing
8 a National Co-ordination Team vision of the world, with
9 a UK government who were interested - but not very
10 interested.

11 I think after that time, as the pressures mount -
12 particularly as Sinbad began and MND South East began to
13 worry about filling the squares of the city that they
14 were surging into, and particularly leaving a legacy in
15 the areas into which they were surging - then the focus
16 on the PRT became much more acute. And this in a sense
17 took these tensions that had always been embedded,
18 I think, in the vision of the PRT -- was it long-term
19 capacity-building, was it short-term effect -- and
20 brought them right out into the open, and the effect of
21 Sinbad internally, I think, was to make departmental
22 relations quite tricky because there was a lot of
23 expectation from the military, and of course in any war
24 or conflict the voice of the MoD in London, I imagine,
25 is listened to very carefully.

1 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes. That leads me to ask the question I was
2 working around to -- and you have already begun to touch
3 on it -- which is, taking the PRT concept, were the
4 conditions in Iraq, in Basra, at that time, because of
5 the security situation, as well as everything else, so
6 difficult that one shouldn't draw too many lessons from
7 the relative success or underachievement of
8 MND South East in the PRT context, or, if you are unable
9 to fulfil the requirements that you suggest are
10 required -- unity of strategic objective, a supervisory
11 structure that enables a plan to be formed -- is then
12 the PRT as a concept the right kind of instrument to
13 execute such a plan in those circumstances?

14 MARK ETHERINGTON: I think the latter, Chairman, and I think
15 that because I have seen it relatively often. I have
16 seen it done in all ways. A plan in theatre needs to be
17 owned by someone. It doesn't initially have to be an
18 individual - though that would be a military model - but
19 it can be a group of people.

20 I think the difficulty for us is that lessons
21 learned under these circumstances are in a sense the
22 more valuable because they are learned under
23 circumstances where every defect is highlighted by the
24 operational difficulty of what we are trying to achieve.
25 It is all very well saying you can run a marathon and

1 then going once round the block, but if you actually
2 have to do it and test the concept under the most
3 difficult of circumstances, then I think the lessons are
4 all the more valid. They may not be that obvious under
5 other circumstances but under these and, I think, in
6 Afghanistan, they are particularly valuable.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: I would like to press this just one stage
8 further. You mentioned just now the possibility of
9 military command for some structure like this. The
10 American system, as we have been told in evidence and in
11 other discussion, is deeply allergic to the notion of
12 a mixed chain of command; it has got to be military or
13 it is two things which don't necessarily connect. There
14 is -- and again we have heard favourable evidence that
15 the period in Baghdad of Ambassador Crocker and
16 General Petraeus did work although it was two streams.
17 Would you like to comment on that phenomenon, and then
18 finally could you relate that to Sinbad and how far the
19 planning of Sinbad worked in with the civilian side at
20 that time.

21 MARK ETHERINGTON: I'll try. I didn't know much about the
22 Crocker/Petraeus relationship. I knew the
23 Sanchez/Bremer relationship better, though I doubt in
24 function and structure it was much different.

25 There had always been these two chains from the

1 beginning in Iraq and it did make life pretty difficult
2 to me at the time. I remember in my province in 2003
3 not being allowed to receive intelligence about my
4 province because I wasn't a military officer, and
5 clearly that's absurd - but this is what happened to us.

6 So this dual structure persisted, of course,
7 throughout our time in Iraq as a coalition. I think it
8 was possible to make it work. General Shirreff had
9 always said, when I asked him, that he felt he had
10 sufficient latitude to flex, as required, between, let's
11 say, British objectives and coalition objectives and
12 did so for Sinbad.

13 So, clearly the ideal would be a mixed chain. Now,
14 the Americans can do it because, of course, they have an
15 enormous armed force, who can turn their hands pretty
16 much to anything. We are not nearly so rich in
17 resources, so I suspect we are forced to take more water
18 with our wine than perhaps they are. I think in Basra,
19 in other words, because the military were so constrained
20 in resource terms and had been under-resourced from the
21 beginning -- and they have my sympathies, it must have
22 been very difficult to do what they did -- we had no
23 choice but to look outwards and take the help where we
24 could find it.

25 So my feeling was that we were so constrained at the

1 time, in terms of resources in Basra, and so
2 overshadowed by the problem, which, of course, had grown
3 still larger -- all the more reason for us to look very,
4 very carefully at what we had and how best to make it
5 work together.

6 Now, in Sinbad -- that was the last of, I suppose,
7 the primarily military operations that we did -- from
8 our side this sense of, "Oh, this is the last throw of
9 the dice," was quite damaging. It wasn't the "last throw of
10 the dice" for us, so far as we were concerned. So far as
11 we are concerned, we thought we would be there for some
12 time. The tensions, the operational tensions, at the
13 time had created damage, I think, to a hard-won
14 departmental unity, and I have to say -- and I was asked
15 this earlier on -- it was here, I think, that
16 NMD Southeast became somewhat disappointed with the PRT,
17 I think, for not getting with the short-term programme.
18 For us, we felt that the short-term programme wasn't
19 going to accomplish anything and - I have to be frank
20 with you - I say I remain of that view.

21 THE CHAIRMAN: You have given us not only your evidence this
22 morning -- and thank you for that. It has been helpful
23 to hear a perspective that we have heard from others
24 from different perspectives. But we will try and take
25 them all together. And thank you for that.

1 Is there any final set of reflections? Because you
2 have given us both that valuable March 2007 report and
3 a lot of other documentation, but is there anything else
4 that you would like to get on the record today?

5 MARK ETHERINGTON: I think, if I could just look through my
6 notes, I would like to make four points, if I may, at
7 the end --

8 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes, do.

9 MARK ETHERINGTON: -- that I would take away, or put forward.

10 The first is that from my point of view -- and
11 I think there is plenty of empirical evidence for it --
12 stabilisation expertise is missing from the centre of
13 our government. I don't think we have a sufficiently
14 robust culture to learn cross-government lessons.
15 I know it is nascent, but I think it really needs to be
16 right at the forefront.

17 For that reason we lurch from theatre to theatre,
18 I think, with no genuine sense of where we left off, and
19 we do so having developed very fine practices in
20 theatre, and this is great credit to the people who pull
21 things together in theatre. They create ad hoc
22 solutions that are often very good ones.

23 What worries me and concerns me is that these are
24 not properly lodged when they come back because there is
25 not this repository for it in the centre. I think some

1 disciplines -- and I think particularly of Strategic
2 Communications, this business of influence, which we
3 practise daily in political life -- are very
4 under-resourced, and I really think this is a deficiency
5 in Britain's armoury that needs to be corrected.

6 People will say we have made progress and that's
7 absolutely true, we have moved on quite a lot from Iraq,
8 but we have a deal further to go, and what worries me is
9 that this progress isn't formalised anywhere, and I worry
10 too that our -- the challenges are mutating quickly
11 enough that they are outstripping our capability to deal
12 with them and keep up with them, the challenges in
13 theatre.

14 THE CHAIRMAN: Is that a reflection on Afghanistan now?

15 MARK ETHERINGTON: I haven't been to Afghanistan for a while
16 now but that would be my private opinion, yes.

17 We need leadership in theatre, we need leadership in
18 Whitehall. I think that's going to help. Those leaders
19 need to have alongside them a repository of
20 stabilisation expertise.

21 How would we do that? The obvious one is to move
22 a stabilisation unit -- and I say "a" stabilisation unit
23 because it is the function that matters -- upward and
24 inward. It cannot do its job where it is, not buried in
25 a department; it has to be out of the departmental

1 fray, it has got to be in the centre. I think we have
2 got to be very careful that whatever we move satisfies
3 the criteria we need of it. It has got to have the
4 expertise at the centre.

5 Sorry, you were about to say something?

6 THE CHAIRMAN: I was going to ask really whether you want to
7 add anything about its political direction and
8 leadership.

9 MARK ETHERINGTON: It is not for me really to comment on
10 things that I know little about. All I would say is
11 that it has not received the attention it should have
12 had. I think we have neglected it for some time. I
13 think you need to look no further than this lack of
14 repository, lack of centre, to many of the problems that
15 have befallen us.

16 We shouldn't confuse symptoms with root causes. The
17 root cause is, we don't have this body of expertise at
18 the centre and we don't access it as we should. So if
19 the Stabilisation Unit - or a Stabilisation Unit - function
20 is moved into the centre, then it needs to be properly
21 configured, of course, and it needs to have the right
22 mix of expertise.

23 Now, many people would say, of course, "We have got
24 a database of experts, of 1,000 experts." It is not
25 enough to have them on the pantry shelf; they need to be

1 in the kitchen when some of these things are being
2 cooked up.

3 Two more, if I may. I worry sometimes about some of
4 the cultural tendencies I have seen in parts of the
5 Civil Service. I worry that we are too - we, they --
6 I worry that there is a culture of speed, a culture of
7 speed and spend over genuine product, of substantive
8 product, of the look of things rather than their
9 substance. I worry that they don't look outward enough
10 sometimes and I think we need to look very carefully at
11 how we interact with this expertise I have spoken about,
12 to make best use of it.

13 The departmentalism issue we have spoken about:
14 where departmental officials, I think, feel
15 a departmental loyalty that tends to eclipse what
16 I would think of as national objectives.

17 The civil/military interface. I saw that
18 Andy Bearpark had also spoken about this. We have made
19 progress here. This tremendously - occasionally -
20 troubled interface between civil effort and military
21 effort. There are many good reasons for that, but we
22 need to take this very seriously. We need to get a much
23 better sense of destination: what is it we want to
24 achieve with our military colleagues; what are the
25 waypoints for that effort over time; and where do we

1 want to end up?

2 I fully understand, I have to say, under some
3 circumstances military impatience with their civilian
4 counterparts. I do think there is a need for us to
5 professionalise in stabilisation. That process has
6 begun; I merely argue it should go much further.

7 I think, in conclusion -- I don't think I have
8 understood the -- I don't think necessarily we should be
9 on a 'war footing' for places like Iraq and Afghanistan.
10 That is perhaps too dramatic a phrase for what we are
11 facing, but I do think that those at the sharp end, so
12 to speak, have every reasonable expectation that those
13 behind them should be bending every sinew of their
14 effort to make sure they are supported thoroughly, and
15 I'm not convinced that that is where we are now.

16 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. We shall add all that
17 into the mixing pot.

18 So thank you for your evidence and for your
19 contribution.

20 I'll close the session there and with thanks to our
21 witness, Mark Etherington.

22 We are going to resume hearings at 2 pm on Monday,
23 when we shall be taking evidence from Carne Ross, who
24 was first secretary to the UK Mission to the
25 United Nations between 1998 and 2002, and with that

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