

## Iraq Inquiry – Personal Statement

**Introduction.** A number of our errors and miscalculations in Iraq are not theatre-specific, but spring from enduring systemic and technical deficiencies in UK's government machinery. This strategic incoherence is demonstrable: how, for example, did UK – a country with considerable experience of conflict and which prided itself on its grasp of counter-insurgency - drift into a position where it had no effective joint civil-military plan in Basra until 2008, five years after assuming responsibility for the city?

The answer is not that there was something specifically Iraqi that prevented us from doing so; but that we lacked the requisite knowledge, resources, institutional coherence and over-arching leadership to properly prosecute a joint campaign, and Iraq simply demonstrated that fact. While it is clearly true that a considered and properly resourced whole-of-government ('Comprehensive') approach would not, of itself, have created success in Iraq or anywhere else, it is fair to say that success – however defined – will prove elusive without it.

The argument is often made that UK has learned from its mistakes in Iraq and moved forward. There is limited evidence of this. It is true that we are working in more unitary fashion than before, that our training has improved and our ability to deploy expertise has been enhanced; but the fact remains that we have not done nearly enough to promote inter-Departmental learning and collaborative rigour - and we have ducked key enabling decisions. We take comfort in statistics – spend, speed, numbers of people deployed – but often lack the underpinning strategic context and analytical rationale that can alone make sense of them.

For so long as we attempt to rely on a largely unvarnished Departmental system in what is termed 'stabilisation' operations, we will continue to fall short of our national objectives - and our potential.

**Four Problems.** We are apt to muddle cause and symptoms. There are, in my view, four root causes of the institutional malaise described above which, over time, have become self-reinforcing:

- **Cultural.** There is no ingrained culture of cross-government lesson-learning in those Whitehall Departments principally concerned with stabilisation matters. We still lack the ability - and inclination - dispassionately to consider our errors, identify and act upon the requisite lessons and move on. This has constrained debate, education and our national performance.

Lacking this rigour, we tend to turn self-referentially inward; and risk viewing criticism as threat, unquestioning assent as loyalty and measuring that loyalty in Departmental rather than national terms. The inherent dangers of this are clear. One fears that a measure of arrogance, complacency and *hubris* has long prevented us learning as

quickly and efficiently about stabilisation and its challenges as we should.

- *Recommendation. A cultural shift is required in relevant Departments to promote substantive cross-government collaboration and lesson-learning, primarily inculcated through enlightened leadership at senior institutional and government levels.*
- **Structures and oversight (theatre).** Sir Nigel Sheinwald and others described in their evidence the strategic priority attached to Iraq by the Prime Minister and the 'strong drive' to succeed. In Basra in 06-07 that anxiety was discernible but unfocused; and hence failed to provide the catalyst for joint structures and processes – and marshal the resources - that might logically have configured us to achieve HMG's goals.

These deficiencies went unrecognised because leaders in theatre had Departmental rather than cross-cutting responsibilities, and hence limited attachment to over-arching imperatives. This being the case, it was difficult to conjure up the 'totemic', 'eye catching' and 'iconic' initiatives regularly demanded by No 10. London's anxiety produced instead a flurry of plans in 06-08 – 'Better Basra' 1-3, 'Salamanca' and 'Sinbad' – that failed properly to reconcile Departmental efforts.

One's sense at the time was that there was something wrong with our systems - something awry - between No 10, Cabinet Office, Departments and field, which precluded the measured and unitary exchange of thought and information and imposed substantial frictional losses upon us. An unleavened Departmental system, prone as it is to 'stove-piping', multiple reporting-lines and duplication, is the wrong model for cross - cutting initiatives of this kind.

- *Recommendation. Departmental postures, taken in aggregate, are no substitute for over-arching national policy. National endeavours require a national plan, clearly delineated responsibilities and unambiguous ownership.*
- **Structures and oversight (Whitehall) - an 'address' for the Comprehensive Approach.** Departments generally lack - and for perfectly understandable reasons given the constraints of civil service career structures - the substantive experience required jointly to plan, engineer, execute and measure stabilisation operations.

Yet there is still no 'address' for the Comprehensive Approach in central Whitehall - a repository of public and private sector talent, cross-government lessons and emergent doctrine - upon which HMG can draw. Advances and best practice in the field are not properly captured because existing mechanisms and processes are insufficiently robust to do so. The present Stabilisation Unit - created

(to HMG's credit) as the Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit in 2004 to enhance the coherence and quality of UK's stabilisation efforts - has not been emplaced, configured or empowered to carry out these tasks effectively.

- *Recommendation. No Unit designed to promote cross-government coherence can do so from within a constituent Department. This role should logically be discharged at the centre of government, at appropriate level and under senior leadership.*
- **Civil-Military Relationship**. This partnership is of pivotal importance in stabilisation operations. We have not developed it as rigorously and carefully as we should, and much of our interaction remains *ad hoc*. While a deal of collaborative work is taking place between civilian departments and their military colleagues, I agree with Andrew Bearpark that a 'step-change' is required in this field. What, precisely, are our national aims, destination, way-points and time-frame?
- *Recommendation. A properly thought-through development programme for this partnership is required, agreed at senior level and with clear milestones and objectives.*

### **Conclusion**

Our difficulties spring chiefly from the fact that UK has neither a central *locus* for the Comprehensive Approach nor a champion of the requisite seniority. This is the master-problem: rectify these deficiencies and the bulk of those above will begin to dissipate. What is required is a re-configuration and re-prioritisation of existing structures and programmes - doing so need neither be expensive nor particularly difficult.

The principal locomotive for change is this 'address' and requisite leadership. The logical place for the function of any Unit that purports to be a centre for expertise and stabilisation excellence is as part of the Cabinet Office – perhaps attached to the NSC Secretariat. It is here that joint national plans would be constructed with Departments and other partners; here that these would then be lodged and overseen; and here that technical expertise can be garnered by government 'high and early' in the planning and execution cycle. Clearly, all this will need to be carefully interlocked with field structures, analysis and reporting to ensure a unitary and informed national approach in theatre and out.

Without the changes described above – and this structural adjustment particularly – I fear that our ability to plan and undertake complex joint stabilisation tasks will remain significantly constrained.

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