Statement for the Iraq Inquiry, December 2010

1. From 2000 to 2006 I was the chief spokesman for and media advisor to the Foreign Office, first with the title Head of News Department, then upgraded to Director of Communications. The essence of the role was to provide the Foreign Secretary, ambassadors and senior officials with timely advice on the impact of foreign policy developments, in advance, so that the government's own initiatives as well as events outside its control could be anticipated and dealt with publicly in a professional way. This involved an intimate knowledge of policy discussion and of emerging threats and challenges across the world. I ran a press office that expanded into a directorate of communications, with a working style that ensured I was aware of as much information as possible so as to make judgements about what needed dealing with, and how to deal with it. I travelled with the Foreign Secretary to almost all his engagements abroad, taking part in formal and informal discussions with him, his most senior officials, and special advisors, across the whole range of issues that concerned them, and me. I was the only official who attended all the Foreign Secretary's office meetings – that is, formal meetings of officials to discuss policy – since his team of private secretaries and special advisors split responsibilities among themselves, and no senior official covered the whole range of issues as I did. I saw papers up to a high level of security clearance and, I believe, had a relationship of trust and respect with senior officials that give me early insights into their anxieties about and hopes for British foreign policy.

2. So I was involved in Iraq policy. However, with hindsight, I can see that my knowledge was partial. First, I recall seeing no legal advice. I wish I had, as this might have aroused my usually sceptical instincts. Second, I was aware that my security clearance was not to the very highest level. Third, it was a frustration of the job that I was always aware, not only on Iraq, that although I felt I was seeing all telegrams and policy papers, there was a certain amount of correspondence that I was not seeing. I can give no worthwhile evidence, for example, about exchanges between 10 Downing Street and the White House. I have come to see in retrospect, not least through various memoirs and diaries, that this was a crucial gap in my knowledge.

3. One problem with this gap is that it gave me the illusion that the Foreign Office was playing a more important role in Iraq policy than I now believe to be the case. Our intense efforts to find a diplomatic solution through the United Nations seemed more central to me then than they do now that many of the principals have published recollections in which the UN process seems peripheral. My knowledge was mainly of the UN process, in which Jack Straw and his senior advisors believed sincerely, right up to the last weekend before the war. I was present at the small meeting at the end of the UN process when the Foreign Secretary, Michael Jay (Permanent Secretary) and Peter Ricketts (Political Director) considered the telegram from Jeremy Greenstock (ambassador to the UN) which said he had lost hope of getting a second resolution through the UN Security Council, and asked for instructions. That meeting decided that he must nevertheless continue to try.

4. This is to get ahead, but it is the context for all that came before: our team's sincere hope and belief that this problem might be resolved without war. The military action had always been a serious possibility, but we hoped as a lever on Saddam Hussein's decision-making. It still baffles me that Saddam Hussein did not take the 'final opportunity' offered by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441, which was meant by its main authors (Jack Straw and Colin Powell) to be a serious offer, not a ploy. As the Foreign Secretary often said, we had to take 'yes' for an answer if we offered a final opportunity to comply with the UN.

5. I will now give my account, with the proviso that these events are far enough away for memory to be deceptive. I hope this is useful to the inquiry.

6. I cannot recall when Iraq became the over-riding issue of the many that preoccupy the Foreign Secretary and his senior staff. It was always important, but was not dominant in our thinking in the spring and early summer of 2002. The Foreign Secretary was chiefly preoccupied with trying to persuade India and Pakistan back from the edge of a war that might easily have gone nuclear. This was his 'lead', as Iran was to become in 2003, in terms of which building led on pressing foreign issues, No 10 or FCO. It was also the Foreign Secretary's lead in relation to the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, who was content for Jack Straw to deal with Kashmir while Powell tried to launch a Middle East peace initiative.

7. I recall being asked for a view on a possible dossier on weapons of mass destruction some time in the spring of 2002. The FCO view was that the material available was weak on Iraq, stronger for example on Libya, and I agreed with this. I was instinctively against the idea of a dossier, though I no longer remember whether this instinct pre-dated sight of this material. My approach to media-communications was always to establish indisputable facts and rest on them. This exercise seemed to me to rest on uncertainties, as by definition we did not know what Iraq had done with weapons and materials which it had been told by the UN to account for, but hadn't. That is not to say I questioned the general concern about Iraq, only that I had a feeling we would be in difficulty if we were asked for evidence of things that were inherently unknown to the international community. I had no inkling that Iraq may no longer possess such weapons, only an anxiety that we could not know the extent of weaponry which the UN was unable to inspect or verify.

8. I have, in preparing this statement, seen a note that I produced in March 2002, setting out ideas for a media campaign. I recall feeling it necessary to do so, though not what internal or external event prompted this. I see that our Iraq press officer, Mark Matthews, had produced a media strategy, for which I was writing a covering note. So clearly there was a heightened activity in Whitehall at the time.

9. But this was not my main preoccupation, and in the role I then played, I had to make decisions about the use of time and energy, which involved 'parking' problems that were not imminent, while watching out for them becoming so. However, before long, I believe in April, I read in *The Observer* that there was going to be a dossier. (My March note refers to a dossier, but I am sure there had been no decision definitely to produce one). This news story, about which I had no foreknowledge, led to the summer of speculation about when

the dossier was going to be produced, and to increasing media speculation that its non-appearance was the result of scanty evidence. This was an entirely predictable media response, and I hoped that the idea would be dropped, even at the price of some embarrassment. I took this view not from reading the intelligence (which I did), nor from office meetings (of which I recall no set-piece discussion in the Foreign Secretary's room as we were having at the time on, for example, Gibraltar), but simply from instinct.

10. One of my many regrets about this period is that I had no informal discussions with sceptical FCO officials. I later learned – after I had left the FCO - from Carne Ross that people at his level were always doubtful about the continued existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. None of them raised their concerns with me in the way that officials often did about other issues, knowing that the Foreign Secretary expected me to be the person at his meetings who said 'yes, but' to the prevailing wisdom. My recollection is that there was never a voice raised in the Foreign Secretary's presence, or in the flow of paper to him that was copied to me, that ever raised doubts that Iraq still possessed weapons of mass destruction.

11. My biggest regret is never saying 'yes, but'. Having thought a lot about this over the years, I have come to the conclusion that it would have been improper for a spokesman to question the accuracy of intelligence. I was impressed – still am, even with hindsight – by the earnestness and diligence of all senior officials at the FCO and at the Cabinet Office Secretariat under John Scarlett, whom I regard as a man of the highest professionalism, visibly agonising over the precise choice of words to express accurately his advice to ministers and other officials.

12. Another regret is that I did not raise my doubts about the idea of a dossier earlier, more robustly, and directly with Alastair Campbell. However, I doubt that this would have made a difference. I did strongly argue in January 2003 against the second dossier, at a meeting chaired by Alastair Campbell, and believed I had won the argument, only to hear that the decision had been reversed after I had left to board a plane with the Foreign Secretary to Indonesia.

13. I did nothing about my concerns until August 2002. I vividly recall feeling that I had to do something. Jack Straw had gone on holiday, so I wrote a note for him to see on his return asking that he try to persuade the Prime Minister to forget about a dossier. I do not recall the reason for my sudden urgency: it may simply have been that I had the time to think clearly, or it may have been a sense that decisions were imminent after the holiday break. The burden of my argument was not about the quality of specific intelligence, which I never dreamed of judging, but my strong sense that we should not take on ourselves the burden of proof, when all the UN resolutions put the burden on Saddam Hussein to show he had destroyed his weapons. We couldn't prove it if the inspectors couldn't.

14. I returned from my own holiday just as the Prime Minister publicly announced that there would be a dossier. So I never had any response to my note, and it was by then overtaken, and of no importance, it seemed to me. I followed the policy laid down by the elected Prime

Minister, and had no objection to it other than my own instincts, which I felt were outweighed by his. People now find it hard to believe that anyone involved in Iraq policy was not aware of the wrongness of building a case on non-existent weapons of mass destruction. How did we not realise? One reason that I did not realise – as well as my points above about my respect for the judgement of key officials – was that Tony Blair had been right about Kosovo against the prevailing wisdom. Some in the media argued for 78 consecutive days that bombing could not win that conflict, and when on day 79 it did, they moved on without acknowledgement. Having seen Tony Blair's instincts vindicated in adversity – in my view – I was inclined to believe he was right again. My concerns about the dossier were about tactics, not strategy. I would not have continued working for a government which I suspected of misleading the public about anything, never mind potential war.

15. But we were not working for war. The Foreign Office's chief concern that September was with the UN. The Foreign Secretary would be visiting New York for the UN General Assembly, at which we were hoping that the Prime Minister had succeeded in persuading President Bush to approve and announce a UN process. We did not know until the President spoke that this persuasion had succeeded, and when it did, all the efforts of the Foreign Secretary and his team were focused on drafting a Security Council resolution and gathering support for it. To the FCO, war was far from inevitable, but various memoirs have made me feel we and the State Department were well outside the real decision-making process flowing between Downing Street, the White House and Pentagon. My recollection of the purpose of the dossier is that it was meant to show that the problem of Iraq could no longer be ignored, without specifying what action should be taken. I do not recall any considered policy-making process on which to base a view of what the dossier was intended for. I was involved in no discussion of whether or why, only how, once the decision had been announced.

16. During our preparations for the UN General Assembly, I was invited to a meeting by Alastair Campbell to discuss the intended dossier. Media specialists in this subject believe there were a number of meetings, but I recall only the first. It was clear that no decision had been taken about who would produce the dossier. John Scarlett said intelligence had no experience of writing documents for publication and would need the help of a 'golden pen'. He turned to me. Alastair Campbell did not take this up. At the end of the meeting, I asked Alastair what his intention was. He said he was inclined to give the task to the No 10 Strategic Communications Unit.

17. When I reported this verbally to the Foreign Secretary and Michael Jay, they were clear that the dossier must be produced by the Foreign Office, not Number Ten, and I should be the 'golden pen'. I was still sceptical of the whole idea, but we were where we were, and the dossier was going to happen. I had little time before going to the UN, which was a higher priority to me, so I asked John Scarlett, in view of his 'golden pen' comment, if he would like to give me the material he intended to use, so that I could show him how to produce it in publishable form. I did this over the weekend. It was a routine job of taking the strongest points and putting them in an executive summary, while taking care to reflect their content accurately, and introducing them with the sort of language that was familiar from speeches and interviews given by the PM and Foreign Secretary. I felt the result was underwhelming,

commenting to colleagues that there was nothing much new in it. My feeling that this was not a good idea persisted, but the PM had ruled, and I was relieved to hear that No 10 had decided that John Scarlett himself would write the dossier, by which time I was in New York.

18. Some journalists have detected similarity between the shape of my effort and the finished product, but it would have been surprising if an organisation which had never produced a public document not taken some pointers from a professional.

19. My version did not include what became known as the '45 minutes intelligence'. I never saw this, I suppose because I was travelling when it appeared in an intelligence assessment, and did not see highly classified material while way. Nor did anyone draw it to my attention as potentially newsworthy, nor consult me about its possible use in the dossier. The first I knew of it was when I attended a meeting shortly before publication. I remember coming back to my office and saying words to the effect that there was at least something new in it now. John Scarlett asked me to go through the dossier with his staff with a journalist's eye – that is, to challenge weak points – but I do not recalled whether '45 minutes' was in that version. I don't believe so. I have no recollection of being given a chance to comment on or question it. By the time I saw it, the dossier was ready for publication, if my memory serves at this distance.

20. Nor do I have any recall of briefing the media on the dossier, as the announcement was being made by the PM, and when No 10 was in the lead, it led. But I will not claim to recall every conversation of eight years ago, and it is possible that some journalists who made a habit of talking to me did so that day. My distinct general impression is that the dossier underwhelmed the media and was forgotten until Andrew Gilligan's BBC broadcast the following summer. I do not recall ever suggesting that the Foreign Secretary make use of it in his many interviews and speeches, on which I always made recommendations. I have no recollection of what use, if any, was made of the dossier in UK briefings at the time of Colin Powell's presentation of US evidence to the UN Security Council, at which I was present. My chief concern was with explaining to the media the efforts being made to draft, agree and secure what became Resolution 1441, and then the efforts to use its 'final opportunity' to achieve a peaceful outcome. The diplomatic effort did involve what the Foreign Secretary used to call 'the Straw paradox': that Saddam Hussein could be induced to comply with the UN only by a threat of military action that was credible and therefore would have to be used if there was no compliance.

21. I was responsible for helping the Foreign Secretary prepare his responses to the reports given to the UN by Hans Blix after the weapons inspectors were re-admitted to Iraq (which seemed to us evidence that the Straw paradox was applying sufficient pressure to make the UN process work). My recall of the Foreign Secretary's press conferences and interviews is that, in citing a short list of weaponry unaccounted for, we relied on inspectors' reports rather than the dossier, but this may be hindsight wisdom at work.

22. As the UN process approached failure, I was involved with Alastair Campbell, at David Manning's request, in highlighting the importance of the statement by the President of

France that he would veto a second resolution whatever the circumstances. It was my clear understanding that this interview had persuaded wavering members of the Security Council – particularly Mexico and Chile, as I recall – not to take the political pain of supporting us in the Council as we were going to fail anyway. These briefings were sincere, as were all my briefings, and as was my belief in Iraq policy; though on that, the fall of Saddam Hussein led to a shocking enlightenment. For a period after Saddam's fall, I expected daily to hear that WMD had been discovered, but soon became puzzled, then alarmed, before realising that they were not going to be found.

23. I had never imagined for a moment that of all the outcomes of this intense process, the truth would be that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction. I believe the same is true of the Foreign Secretary and all those I worked closely with at that level, though as noted earlier I have since learned that some middle-ranking officials did have doubts. Some journalists are convinced we must have known. But no spokesman would knowingly subject a Foreign Secretary – and himself – to the humiliation of going before the media empty-handed, as we had to a few weeks after the invasion. The only possible policy at that stage was to be honest – and that had been the policy of the Foreign Secretary and his team all along. But we were wrong.

Notes

24. The inquiry has asked about the briefing for the Parliamentary Labour Party. This was not my business and I have no recall of it. And the inquiry asks about the PM's foreword to the dossier. I have no recall of being consulted, though the usual proviso applies, that my memory may be wrong at this distance.

Lessons for the Future

25. On my specific responsibility, media communications, there are no new lessons, only old ones. Spokespeople and media advisors must always strive to be honest, basing their advice and briefings on what indisputable facts they can find. The difficulty with this apparently simple philosophy is that the truth tends to be ambiguous, open to interpretation and argument. It is often possible for sincere people to disagree honestly about what they regard as the truth. Even facts are not always as solid as they seem, and need checking and challenging vigorously, at times to the point of cussedness. That was always my approach, but it failed the Iraq test.

26. I had come to feel, by the time of the January 2003 meeting referred to above, that producing public papers like the dossier was the wrong approach, because the media had come to see them as productions – that is, whatever their accuracy, inherently not to be

trusted. But if government is not to produce public documents making an accurate but robust case for its policy, where does that leave democratic accountability?

27. Such papers must self-evidently be sound, but I always thought the September dossier was. Even with the benefit of much hindsight, I cannot say – ah, yes, here is the moment at which it should have been obvious to me that this was not sound. So my only 'looking to the future' conclusion is that government media advisors must be as alert and thorough as they can be, but will never be able to guarantee that they will detect flaws in a public case that will emerge later when policy makes contact with reality under public scrutiny.

28. On the wider question of how government avoids taking military action on a false premise, I am equally wary of any certain answers, despite my regrets about the war in Iraq. If Britain is never to intervene, we will have to accept blame for some terrible things that might otherwise be avoided. If intervening in Iraq was wrong, so was not intervening in Bosnia, in my view. And I remain convinced that the intervention in Kosovo was justified, whereas standing aside would not have been. After that conflict, I was moved by Kosovan leaders who told Robin Cook that they were kept going, in hiding, by the strength of his words at the regular televised press conferences which I wrote for him. So, despite Iraq, I cannot conclude that Britain's role is to leave well alone, or that there is nothing that my trade can contribute constructively to these difficult, ambiguous situations, which will presumably continue to occur.

29. I am left with the conclusion that there are no simple conclusions, that leadership is about judgement, which is inherently uncertain, and that advisors simply have to strive as hard as they can to be rigorous in their advice while recognising that to act is to risk error, but not to act can be a mistake too.

John Williams