

24 January 2011

Ms Margaret Aldred,
Secretary to the Inquiry,
The Iraq Inquiry,
35 Great Smith Street,
London SW1P 3BG

Dear Ms Aldred,

I should like to offer some observations on a point made to the Iraq Inquiry by The Rt Hon Tony Blair about a judgement contained in my Valedictory Despatch from Basra dated 26 January 2004.

In both his Witness Statement dated 14 January 2011 and his oral evidence of 21 January, Mr Blair states that when I left my post in Basra in January 2004 I was 'on balance optimistic, not pessimistic'. I can confirm that my Valedictory Despatch recorded my belief at the time that 'the balance of probability is positive'. This judgement of course referred only to southern Iraq – the region for which I had some responsibility – not to the country as a whole about which I was in no position to make such an assessment.

I believe however that it is important that this judgement be viewed in the context of other judgements and recommendations which I put forward at that time. On 21 January 2004, just a few days before my Valedictory Despatch, I made a specific proposal in a telegram entitled 'South Iraq after 30 June' for a strategy to maintain, beyond the disbandment of the Coalition Provisional Authority due to take place in June 2004, the momentum and benefits of the work which was then under way in the four southern provinces. My notes of my call on Mr Blair at No 10 Downing Street on 17 February 2004 record that I told him that my main concern was that the momentum of the work of CPA(South) should be maintained and that I had so advised the Foreign Secretary, Mr Jack Straw (I was referring to this proposal for a post-June strategy, which had been sent to the FCO and copied to No 10 Downing Street).

The essence of this strategy was that agreement should be reached with the US and Iraqi authorities to maintain a multinational development presence in the south, accredited to the Iraqi government, which made use of the expertise, contacts and trust which had been built up during the tenure of the Coalition Provisional Authority. I recorded my view that disbandment of this effort, on the other hand, would cause the failure of most of the projects then under way or in the pipeline and bring an end to the capacity-building of Iraqis, all of which were proving both effective and welcome to them.

My notes record that Mr Blair was non-committal in response to my concerns about this. In the event my strategy was not accepted. The international team, who included a large number of British specialists, was disbanded. While DFID managed a small number of British-owned projects, the vast majority of the projects which were being pursued by the CPA failed, as I had feared.

I would not suggest that an alternative approach such as I had proposed would have prevented the subsequent build-up of violence. But it is possible that the attitudes of the people in the South would have been more positive as they experienced the benefits of the projects as they came on stream. It was with such considerations in mind – the need for continued civilian attention and effort - that I was able to offer Mr Blair a measure of optimism in January 2004. Had I known that the civilian capital, experience and impetus built up over the previous year would be allowed to fall away, thereby increasing the burden on the armed forces, I would no doubt have offered a different judgement.

Yours sincerely

Hilary Synnott

Sir Hilary Synnott KCMG
CPA Regional Coordinator for southern Iraq, 2003-04