



Defence Committee

Oral evidence: [Decision making in Defence Policy](#),
HC 682

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Members present: Rory Stewart (Chair), Richard Benyon, Mr James Gray, Mr Dai Havard, Dr Julian Lewis, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Sir Bob Russell, Bob Stewart, Derek Twigg and John Woodcock.

Questions 1-75

Witness: **Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles KCMG LVO**, former HM Ambassador to Kabul, and former Special Representative to the Foreign Secretary for Afghanistan and Pakistan, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Defence Committee's inquiry into decision making in defence policy. Our first witness is Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles. Welcome back to the Committee. Sir Sherard was, as part of a long and distinguished career in the Foreign Office, our ambassador in Kabul and then our special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. We have a number of Members to bring in and a lot of issues to tackle.

To begin with, Sir Sherard, can you draw any broader, bigger lessons about decision making from the British experience in Afghanistan, specifically Helmand? Are there lessons that we can draw for the future from what went wrong, and what can we improve in decision making?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: Thank you, Chair, and thank you very much for inviting me to appear in front of the Committee. I do so as someone who was, is and always will be a great admirer of what I think are the best armed forces in the world, and also as a very strong supporter of our indispensable alliance with the United States. During the three and a half years during which I worked in and on Afghanistan, I did draw some lessons about the handling of the relationship between the armed forces and the civilians who direct them in a democracy, and also about the handling of our relationship with the United States in a conflict such as Afghanistan.

As with any area of public policy, my view and experience is that things work best when there is a proper balance, with strong Ministers—strong politicians giving proper political direction to the civil servants who provide them with what is supposed to be objective advice—and a strong and balanced relationship between confident armed forces that provide

military advice, civilians in the Ministry of Defence and across Whitehall, and Ministers who have the confidence to challenge that advice and, in the end, to give political direction.

Some of my early years as a diplomat were spent in the security policy department of the Foreign Office, and one of its roles was to help provide strategic direction to the Ministry of Defence. In that capacity, I remember going in 1991 to the new democracies of eastern Europe and explaining to them how in Britain civilians were in charge of the military. There were times in Afghanistan when I felt, both in the Ministry of Defence and across Whitehall, that civil servants, civilian advisers to Ministers, civilian officials and their political masters sometimes did not show the moral and intellectual courage they needed to challenge advice from the armed forces. Good armed forces and excellent armed forces like our own need to be optimistic and confident. They need to operate collectively and there needs to be obedience, but that does not always lead to a situation in which they will necessarily offer the most independent or objective advice.

Another factor is the strong tribal loyalties that make our armed forces so special. There is the loyalty to a particular regiment or branch and to one armed service over the others. An example of that is that I remember a very senior British general criticising the present Chief of the Defence Staff because he favoured 3 Commando Brigade, which is a Royal Marines formation, for a particular role over 16 Air Assault Brigade, which is an Army formation. It was regarded as being somehow disloyal to the Army that he favoured the Royal Marines over an Army formation. That is a small example of the way that tribal loyalty can sometimes distort the view that the military gives.

Military advice is absolutely essential. I do not think that there is anything structurally wrong with how Whitehall is built, particularly under the present Government with the National Security Council; it is much more a question of giving the civilians in the system the confidence and courage to ask the right questions and to take the wider view in the national interest.

Q2 Chair: That was a very polite and positive view. Reading between the lines, you seem to be saying that the military had too much influence on the process and was too optimistic. Is that correct?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: No, I am saying that at times and in places, one saw military advice to Ministers that was driven by a military view of the situation that was not necessarily the same as what the wider national interest might or might not be. There was enthusiasm for a particular role. On Afghanistan, the British Army and the British armed forces were immensely and rightly keen to make a success of Afghanistan after what some people saw as a less than successful intervention in southern Iraq. There were great pressures to be successful and positive and to impress our American allies, whereas a wider, more objective, more historical view of the situation would have suggested that while military force was absolutely essential for success in Afghanistan, it needed to be part of a wider political strategy. For better or worse—I think for worse—our American allies were not delivering such a political strategy. We saw enthusiasm for particular services to fulfil particular roles and we saw that, as soon as troops became available from Iraq, the suggestion almost immediately was that they were redeployed in Helmand, without our actually being able to stand back and say, “This may be good tactics, but where is the strategy—what is the outcome we’re hoping to deliver in the long run?”

Q3 Mrs Moon: I wonder if you could help me in teasing this out a little. You are talking about a lack of intellectual and moral courage in politicians and, perhaps, over-optimism within the Ministry of Defence. But how much was the advice and information that was being provided open and frank, and how much was it counter-balanced by advice and information from other non-Ministry of Defence departments? Was the information fully rounded enough, or was there too great a balance, and is there a danger in decision-making when too much responsibility for the direction of advice comes from one particular department, rather than being neutral across departments?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: I am certainly not saying that it was only politicians who sometimes lacked the confidence to question the military advice they were receiving. There were also civilians in the Ministry of Defence, where the civilian officials have lost ground in recent years to the uniformed branch. It would be a parody to say so, but we could imagine the Department for Education being populated entirely by teachers, or DEFRA being populated largely by farmers—one would not necessarily get the wider view of the national interest in determining educational policy or agricultural policy. That is a systemic difficulty in the Ministry of Defence.

In the cold war, when strategic theory was very much the province of people like Sir Michael Quinlan and other very distinguished permanent secretaries, the military saw itself more as executors of that strategic theory. In this very difficult war in Iraq and then Afghanistan, the military, who are better educated than ever before, pushed some of the civilian influence to one side.

That did not apply just inside the Defence Ministry; I remember reporting from Afghanistan—this is in my book—that the senior American general in Afghanistan, a great friend of the United Kingdom, had said to me privately that, in order to win this war, he needed 500,000 men. I was tempted to say, “General—and for 50 years.” He said to me, as a friend, privately, alone in his cabin in the ISAF headquarters in Kabul, “Sherard, I’m worried about the British Army in Afghanistan. There are not enough troops there—3,000 men is not enough.” I reported this in a private e-mail back to London, to just six people: two in the Ministry of Defence, two in the Cabinet Office and two in the Foreign Office. A very senior official in the Foreign Office called me in and said, “Sherard, you mustn’t report this sort of thing to London—this American criticism of the British Army—because it upsets the MOD. The Foreign Office needs good relations with the Ministry of Defence.” For that official, the priority was good relations across Whitehall rather than a robust analysis of the national interest.

Another example of that from early on in my time. The very brave young diplomats and intelligence officers who worked in the hugely expanded British embassy in Kabul were reporting from their contacts on the ground—many of them spoke Pashto and Dari—that security was gradually deteriorating. This was not welcome in the Ministry of Defence or in certain quarters in Whitehall, but they were reporting the ground truth as they saw it. A senior general came up to me and said “Sherard, your embassy has lost the plot.” In fact, my embassy was trying its very best, with the support of a Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, who had told us to report the truth as we saw it.

We had constant tension with the defence intelligence service, who we knew from internal e-mail traffic were divided because they were under pressure from the MOD to say that

progress was being made. However, an analysis of the situation on the ground showed that although we were of course succeeding locally and temporarily, thanks to brave and very successful efforts in garrisoning certain parts of Afghanistan, we were displacing the problem elsewhere and violence was rising in the areas that were not garrisoned by allied forces. Inside the defence intelligence service, there were different factions. One faction said that the line from NATO, the Americans and the generals that things were steadily improving was right. There were others who were questioning that, and that view was not welcome.

Q4 Mrs Moon: So you are saying that across the piece, there was a lack of intellectual rigour and moral courage in being willing to look at and expose truth and use truth in the decision-making process.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: Well, I think that's a bit harsh. What I would say is that all of us feel tremendous loyalty to the armed forces. We saw these brave men and women being prepared to lay down their lives for their country. Particularly among civilians with no experience of the military—none of our senior civil servants or politicians, or very few of them, had military experience—there was a feeling that in a war, one has always to defer to the military. I think that knowledge of history—Clemenceau remarked that war is sometimes too important to leave to the generals—meant that there was, across the top of Whitehall during a war, a worry about questioning the advice from the Army, and also a knowledge that we were nested in a wider American war, where we may have had doubts about American strategy, or the lack of it, but we felt we had to be loyal to our most important ally. I think those were influences on our judgment, but people did ask questions.

I would not want to say it was a general rule, but in my experience, none of the senior civil servants and none of the senior politicians who I worked for privately believed that a strategy that was essentially a tactical one of garrisoning parts of Afghanistan in the hope that they would stabilise and that stability would spread outwards was enough. It was necessary, but not enough, and privately many people had doubts about whether this would work in the long run, although it might work temporarily, and I think those doubts have been borne out by the situation on the ground today.

Q5 Mrs Moon: What influence did the change of Minister at the top in the Ministry of Defence have? Was there an element of a change of Secretary of State being utilised by the military to get a decision that they wanted? John Reid took us into Helmand and then you had Des Browne come in, and very shortly after, there was a decision to go into northern Helmand. What was happening in the mix that you have just described at the point where we made that strategic decision to go north?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: Well, I wasn't around then, so I can't comment on that. All I would say is that I think it is terribly important for a confident and courageous politician to say, as David Miliband did to my team, "I want the honest advice, however unwelcome and awkward it may be. I want the ground truth." It is incumbent on the politician to say to those who serve him, be they civilians or military, that they want that truth. That empowers them to do their very best. As I said at the beginning of this session, I think the British system works best when you have strong politicians and confident civil and military servants offering the best, most honest and objective advice.

Q6 Mr Gray: Sir Sherard, you are providing us with a very useful academic overview of how Whitehall and the military work, but you are very cleverly, as one would expect from a senior ambassador such as yourself, avoiding the important, detailed questions. I know you weren't there at the time when we went into northern Helmand, but the nature of that decision is a key exemplar of precisely what we are looking into—the way in which these things are decided. The two options available are, first, that the incoming Minister, Des Browne, decided to do it and instructed the military to do it; and, secondly, that the military decided to do it and informed Ministers afterwards that they had done it. Which of those two do you think it was, even though you weren't there? The fact that you weren't there makes it easier for you to answer the question.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: I honestly don't know. I haven't studied the papers and I didn't have time to go into all the detailed back-history of Britain's involvement. I would think it highly unlikely that the military went in without political cover of some kind. I think that is most unlikely, but I stress that I don't know.

Q7 Mr Gray: Is it your view that a change of that kind—the major deployment of thousands of troops into a highly dangerous area—should be a strategic decision taken by Ministers, with the military carrying it out, rather than the military doing it? Is it definitely strategic rather than tactical?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: Very definitely. I would point out, and this is in the public record, that the team that went to Helmand to look around at the prospects for stability there, before our intervention, reported back to civil servants in London that they thought it would take at least 10 years to stabilise Helmand, but they were told that the then Prime Minister wanted it done in three years. In fact, all our experience as a nation in stabilising countries around the world is that these things take a lot of time, a lot of strategic patience and huge resources. Stabilising a country in the state Afghanistan was in in 2001 takes decades.

Q8 Mr Gray: Yes, quite. I understand that. My question is, at what stage should decisions be escalated to Ministers? You have made comments about a lack of military expertise among Ministers. You have said that one general declined to ask Ministers about the cost of £70 million to update the runways at Kandahar. On another occasion you said that one Minister asked to be reminded the difference between a brigade and a platoon. I would love to know who that was—perhaps you can tell me later, privately.

You can perhaps refer to when you first went into Kandahar to answer the question of when decisions should be escalated to Ministers, in the context of Afghanistan. It has been alleged elsewhere, for example, that the military originally took the view that if we didn't use the Army we would lose it, and therefore the military were independently enthusiastic about going into Afghanistan, and not for strategic reasons. Give us a bit more on this relationship between generals and Ministers.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: In a way, this goes to social questions that are at the heart of how our society is organised. I found that many of the politicians I worked for and admired in a Labour Government were in awe of the generals and the military. They hadn't experience of the military before they found themselves sitting on committees directing a great and important war.

In answer to your question, Mr Gray, about when things should be referred upwards, my instinct would be the sooner the better. This was a war of national importance in which, for better or worse, the media were closely engaged. There was huge public interest. In general, it is better to consult politicians even if it may not strictly be necessary. There were concerns, for example, about co-ordination between our own armed forces and the American armed forces before proposals were put to British Ministers. Deployment of extra troops was discussed and virtually agreed with the Americans before our own politicians were consulted on that extra deployment.

There were also cases—I do not know whether this was by accident or design—where the papers presented to Ministers were almost incomprehensible to a civilian without knowledge of military acronyms. I am a slight military geek and a great admirer of the military, and I was slightly surprised to find in the papers that were put up that there was no mention in the total force numbers in Afghanistan of our special forces, who were playing a very distinguished role. In fact, the contribution our special forces made was valued by the Americans and the Afghans almost more than anything else we did, but that was not reported to Ministers in the papers giving the total British military contribution, on grounds of security. I found that slightly surprising. After I questioned that, the special force numbers were added rather reluctantly to the description put to Ministers of our overall force posture in Afghanistan.

Q9 Mr Gray: I do not mean to over-simplify what you are saying; it might just be that I am a bog-standard sort of bloke, but I want to be clear about it. I think that you are indicating now, and in previous things you have said elsewhere, that your general feeling about both the initial deployment to Helmand and the move to north Helmand is that things were done without Ministers having a clear decision-making process allowed to them, whether by means of three-letter mnemonics or of not telling them. My impression is—you are not quite saying it clearly yet—that you are of the view that the military decided to do things in a way that Ministers were not necessarily aware of.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: Yes, I think that is fair up to a point. This is not about allocating blame, but I think that there was a duty on civilian civil servants and others to make sure that Ministers—who are, by definition, not experts in military matters—understood the decisions that they were taking. You referred earlier to the decision to deploy the Royal Air Force Tornados to Kandahar at a time when the NATO joint statement of operational requirements said that NATO had enough fast jets in Afghanistan. Quite understandably, the Royal Air Force was very keen to deploy these aircraft to take over from the Harriers.

I did brief a Minister to point out that it would cost £70 million to build new taxiways at Kandahar. They were briefed on it, but that Minister said to me, “Sherard, I can’t question the Chief of the Defence Staff on this because, I confess to you, I don’t know the difference between a Tornado and a torpedo.” That was therefore waved through. The signal has to come from Ministers, who are highly intelligent, have very good political antennae and probably sense that the advice they are getting is not necessarily the whole truth. They need to demand from those who advise them a wider picture.

Q10 Mr Gray: Finally on this line of questions, you used the expression “political top cover” a moment ago, which was quite an interesting phrase to use. In other words, the military

recognise that if they are caught doing something that they should not be doing, or doing it without the proper authority of Ministers, they would be in deep trouble—we will hear from Brigadier Butler shortly—and would need political top cover. The way to achieve that is by getting a decision of some kind signed off, without it being looked into too much. Sending the Tornados to Kandahar is a good example; £70 million of the nation's money used because the RAF had an ambition. In other words it was delivering a *fait accompli*, to use my colleague's expression, to Ministers and hoping that you would get an appropriate initial by sticking it in the bottom of the red box at a particularly busy weekend. I don't know how civil servants work, but do you think that might be roughly right?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: That is a partial, and not wholly inaccurate, picture.

Q11 Derek Twigg: Clemenceau used to visit the front line on a weekly basis, sleeping overnight, sometimes well within range of heavy machine-gun fire. Are you suggesting that Ministers should go that far?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: No, but I do think they should develop an understanding of what is going on on the ground. It is difficult. I accompanied scores of Ministers on visits to Helmand. It is very exciting to put on body armour and a helmet and fly in a Chinook. One always had these upbeat briefings, usually via PowerPoint, on what was going on, and we never in my experience had a negative briefing about what was being achieved. It is incumbent on Ministers to look beyond and behind, and on the civilians and others who advise them.

If one looks at the war diaries of my great hero, Sir Alan Brooke, there we had a very courageous Chief of the Imperial General Staff speaking to a Prime Minister, who was a supreme tactical commander, who had fought with the 17th/ 21st Lancers and the 4th Hussars and in the war in South Africa. If Alan Brooke's diary is to be believed, almost every other week of the war Churchill had some barmy tactical idea or another, usually involving the Royal Marines, and Alan Brooke had the courage to say, "No, Prime Minister. That does not make strategic sense," even though it may have been tactically good to go into Sumatra or back into Norway, or whatever it may have been. What we lacked in this Afghan campaign was that balance between strong Ministers and strong advisers, both civilian and military.

Q12 Derek Twigg: This is interesting. As someone who used to visit the theatre and for Ministers, it would not come as a shock to me if, for instance, you could not stay in one place for 15 minutes, and you had to go out in body armour and were not allowed to go to certain places. It was not a shock to find that things were not quite as good as some of the briefings. Are you suggesting that Ministers never took account of that?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: I think privately many Ministers, civilian officials and some of the senior thinking soldiers did have doubts about where all this was leading, but we were in a war and people were laying down their lives and there was a sense from the top. I really worked only for Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as Prime Ministers; I can't speak for the present Government. There was a sense from the top—at Cabinet Minister level the sense from No. 10 was that we had to make a success of this and drive forward together.

Q13 Derek Twigg: To take that forward a bit, what was your understanding of the relationship between No. 10, DFID, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence? How

did that work or did it not work? Who were the key players there? Were these problems discussed within and between the Departments and No. 10?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: There were obviously difficult relations at the time between some Ministers and the then Prime Minister. There was a sense from No. 10 that they did not want distractions. Whatever the unfair criticism of the Prime Minister—and it was deeply unfair over helicopter hours or decisions that had been made years ago that appeared in the media—there was a sense that, whatever the private doubts in No. 10, the message was that we had to carry on and make a success of it. But I know that the Cabinet Ministers would meet, worry about where this was going, and knew that the military tactics might have been fine, but they needed to be enfolded within a wider political strategy.

Q14 Derek Twigg: But did everybody know their role? Did the Foreign Office understand what their role and contribution was? Did DFID? Clearly, there was a lot of concern about the fact that people were pursuing their own agendas. Was the system, as far as you understood it, dysfunctional or working efficiently?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: It was neither. The system is perfectly fine. The structures are fine, particularly now with the National Security Council, which is a development of the old—

Derek Twigg: If I could just interrupt you, you have said that twice now, but look at Libya; it is arguable that we got that wrong. With Syria, Parliament could not be convinced and therefore the strategy on Syria is still somewhat uncertain. Even under the new system, it does not seem to be working.

Q15 Chair: Am I right in saying that you have not actually operated in the system of the National Security Council, so this is all on the basis on hearsay? Your view on the National Security Council is not very relevant.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: What I would say is that the system in the time that I was there, with a Defence and Overseas Policy Committee of the Cabinet, the Prime Minister, and then military and civil advisers, the theoretical structure was fine. The problems came with perhaps a reluctance on the part of civilians in the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office and, perhaps, elsewhere in Whitehall, to question whether the military advice was the whole picture. I am not sure that that is a structural problem; it is a cultural problem. It needs the politicians at the top to speak to the civil servants, who did not want to be seen to be being disloyal or questioning what the military were doing—it was not a particularly popular thing to go down to Helmand and ask whether some of the rather upbeat PowerPoint presentations were necessarily the whole picture. It requires the political leadership to empower those advisers to offer advice that they hope is honest and objective, but may not always be welcome.

Q16 Derek Twigg: During your time, what was the ministerial involvement in UK decision making in terms of the coalition, particularly with the Americans? Could we override things as Ministers? Could we change strategy without the Americans' agreement? What was the relationship in terms of the UK being able to take its own decisions?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: It was very, very difficult. The view in the Administration of President George W. Bush was that things were going well and that there was not really scope for questioning the strategy, although Condoleezza Rice, when she was Secretary of State, paid a joint visit to Afghanistan with David Miliband and she made some remarks, which I recorded in my book, suggesting that she could see for herself that things were not trending in the right direction. We made a huge effort with the Obama Administration not to criticise the military campaign, but to suggest that it needed to be enfolded within the political strategy—one in Afghanistan and one engaging all the regional players.

Q17 Derek Twigg: But do you think that UK Ministers felt confident enough to take decisions that were not necessarily in line with and in agreement with the Americans?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: It was very difficult. We were part of an allied campaign. In the end, the net effect that we had on the Americans was, I'm afraid, very little. I spent many months as special representative trying to get the American machine to engage on this, with virtually no success. In a way, I think that the Americans knew that they could count on us, more or less, whatever it took. Some of our allies—for example, France, whose support was more conditional—in the end had perhaps more influence in Washington than we did. Because their engagement was not unconditional, the relationship between their armed forces was not quite as symbiotic. The Americans therefore had to work to persuade them to engage in the campaign. With us, we were there because we believed in it. We wanted to impress our American allies, and our support was perhaps less conditional than it might ideally have been.

Q18 Mrs Moon: I am somewhat confused by what you are saying. I do not have a military background, and I do not get excited by putting on body armour and concrete hats and flying in helicopters; it is simply part of the job. But I do get bored and frustrated by upbeat briefs and being told every time you go that the last time it was rubbish, but this time it is wonderful and we know what we are doing. We are able to see through that. We see the nonsense that it is and ask the difficult questions.

What I am worried about is your statement that the papers presented were incomprehensible and information was withheld. I find that very alarming, so I want to be clear. In your opinion, were Ministers being deliberately steered into making decisions that the military wanted? How can you say the system worked when other Departments and civilians were not jumping in and pointing out that information was being withheld and that the briefs were incomprehensible and skewed? How can it work when that is happening?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: Three very good points, each of which I would like to address. First, I just gave one example early on. I have no evidence of other information being withheld from Ministers, but it was true early on in my time that the papers put to Ministers on our force posture in Afghanistan did not reveal to Ministers the presence of our special forces in Afghanistan and the very important role they were playing.

It is also true that many of the papers, often prepared at high speed in the Ministry of Defence, perhaps by military officers whose first skill was not drafting for civilians, were quite difficult to understand. Perhaps “incomprehensible” is going a bit far, but they did need quite a lot of decrypting, because they were written in military jargon. I am not sure

that that was a deliberate policy, but then, against that, when the military came to a military view that it was necessary to send more troops to Helmand, because there were not enough troops there, they did mount a very strong lobbying campaign, engaging with the Americans and putting pressure on politicians. The senior military would go direct to the politicians.

I never said that the system worked. What I believe is that the structure is not wrong. What was not happening was that people were not playing the roles assigned to them in that structure. The civil servants in the Ministry of Defence, in the Foreign Office, in the Cabinet Office, in DFID, in the Treasury and elsewhere in Whitehall, were not saying to Ministers separately or privately, or alongside the military advice, “You may want to question this. This does not make sense. It does not accord with the Joint Intelligence Committee’s latest assessment of the outlook in Afghanistan.”

There was an atmosphere—I can speak only for the three and a half years that I was working on it—in which that sort of advice was not welcome. Very early on, the senior official responsible for Afghanistan in the Foreign Office said to me, “I think we have stirred up a hornets’ nest in Helmand, but I cannot say that now, because we are in there now.” Before I left, I said to one of the most senior officials in the Foreign Office that I did wonder privately—not having been there, but having read the papers—whether we had made a strategic mistake in going into Helmand. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “Well, we’re there now.” There was a sense that we all had to crack on and make the best of it, because that was what the Americans wanted and it was naturally what our armed forces were very keen to make a success of.

Q19 Mrs Moon: So it wasn’t the politicians wanting to be lied to; it was civil servants and military officers deciding to withhold information and withhold a clear picture of what was actually happening on the ground?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: I think “withhold” is wrong.

Q20 Mrs Moon: I’m sorry—if you are told, “We don’t want them to know that,” that is withholding information. That is what you said: “Don’t tell them, you are not allowed to send information like that back to London.” You were told to withhold that information.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: In one particular instance, yes I was, that is perfectly true; but as you said, much of this was obvious—to politicians with their eyes and ears open on the ground it was obvious that this wasn’t the whole truth. Of course, the civil servants felt that they were put under great pressure that to put up dissenting advice suggesting that this wasn’t right did not make them very popular with their military colleagues. It is very difficult for civilian officials in the Defence Ministry in a war, when the generals are not only fighting the war but fighting to get the resources they need to win that war. For them to put up advice saying, “This isn’t working,” or “We don’t think it’s right”—

Q21 Mrs Moon: It is also difficult, surely, for a Minister to make the right call if there is a conspiracy of silence and optimism surrounding them?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: Yes. As I said at the beginning, it needs the Minister to say to those advising him, “I want you to give me honest advice without fear or favour.” It needs

the civilians in particular to have the professional courage to put up that advice, just as you'd expect your doctor or lawyer to give you independent, dispassionate advice.

Q22 Mrs Moon: So are you saying that Ministers in the Ministry of Defence said, "Keep us in the dark. Keep it fluffy and soft. Don't give us true advice"? I cannot believe that.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: No, I am not saying that.

Q23 Mrs Moon: It just seems that there is an incoherence in the advice that was being given to Ministers. I am deeply worried by the suggestion that only somebody with a military background can serve as a Minister in the Ministry of Defence.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: I certainly didn't suggest that. I think it is very healthy that people without military backgrounds should serve as Ministers, but they do need briefing on the military aspects of their job. I am absolutely not suggesting that only politicians with a military background should serve as Ministers in the Ministry of Defence or elsewhere—quite the reverse.

Q24 Mrs Moon: A final question: was the incoherence, the misinformation and the incomprehensible nature of some of the briefings a deliberate ploy to get the decisions and outcomes that the military wanted?

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: I think that is a bit harsh. We were all engaged—I include myself in that—in a massive act of collective self-deception. We all wanted to believe that it was working; we wanted to please Ministers, the armed forces and the Americans. There is nothing new about this; the same thing happened in the early years of the Vietnam war, when the best and brightest round John F. Kennedy knew that the American strategy in South Vietnam couldn't work and wouldn't work; but they used the phrase that we used ourselves in Afghanistan: "Progress is being made, but challenges remain." It was wishful thinking, rather than some massive conspiracy.

Q25 Chair: I am afraid we are running out of time, but very finally: you keep saying that it is a cultural issue, not an institutional issue. Contained within your argument could be a different kind of argument and I just want to see what your reaction is to this. One could propose that when you are dealing with counter-insurgency and state-building, the core of the whole issue is around culture and working out how people in Helmand are responding to rule of law, security and governance. The only way in which a system can provide that is if we have people who have deep country expertise and deep linguistic expertise. The institutional implications of that is to say that the tour lengths were not long enough, people were not getting out of the embassy compounds enough and the linguistic expertise was not as deep as it should have been. If we really want a system in which civilians are in a position to challenge the military, you would need to reform the way in which the Foreign Office, the intelligence services and DFID work to produce the depth of expertise and knowledge within those institutions, which could allow them to credibly and consistently challenge.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: Yes, I think there is a lot in that. The template for me is always Operation Banner in Northern Ireland, which took 30 years. We had a politician in charge—the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—and reporting to him was the GOC, the Chief Constable, the Northern Ireland civil service and the intelligence and security agencies. We had a political strategy, a social and economic strategy and a tough and

essential security strategy. It was the same in Malaya: there was a single person in charge of a combined effort.

You are right that there needs to be a coherent effort on the ground and regional expertise locally. In January 2008, I wrote a letter—I am not particularly proud of it, but it was designed to please people in Whitehall—saying that 2008 should be the year of Helmand and that we were going to make a success of it. I knew in writing that letter that even if we did everything right in Helmand we were still part of a larger American war effort, and the Americans did not have, in my view, a coherent political strategy for delivering sustainable victory in the long term.

Chair: Sir Sherard, thank you so much for your time.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Brigadier (Retd) Ed Butler** gave evidence.

Q26 Mr Havard: Good morning. It is down to me to start the proceedings.

Under the first general heading of what the aims of the missions were, there is this business of whether there was a conflict of aims. As you know, we are looking at decision making rather than all the details. Clearly, there was a counter-insurgency mission; there was also a counter-narcotics mission, mixed in with a nation-building, comprehensive approach and all that sort of stuff. You have previously made comments about the tensions between the compulsory eradication of poppies and stabilisation. Do you think there was a conflict of aims? How do we go about prioritising what needs to be done in that sort of context? Which was the priority? What was the aim?

Brigadier Butler: Good morning. As some of you know, I have sat in front of this Committee twice, and I have covered a lot of your points already, Dai. In short, there were multiple conflicting and competing missions, there was no clarity about what our strategic objectives were and there was no real definition of what success or failure might look like. There was, at best, a collection of various different objectives, none of which in 2005 or 2006 were ever really clarified and defined to us on the ground.

Q27 Mr Havard: You've said before that there was a weekly conference. It seems that the priorities shifted around and you sequenced them on the basis of the pressures that came out of the overall discussions week by week.

Brigadier Butler: I don't think there was a switching from one objective to the other. There was constant questioning of what we were doing about counter-narcotics, of what our engagement or not should be in the US counter-terrorism operation, of what the nation-building objective really meant and of what our level of support to Regional Command South should be. There was constant questioning, which I began from the very start of my engagement in the middle of 2005, right the way through to the end of my time there in September 2006.

Q28 Mr Havard: Is it fair to say that there was a structure for all of that debate to take place, but that the structure was largely inadequate? Would a better structure have taken your concerns higher up?

Brigadier Butler: Was there a structure in theatre? I do not think so. We certainly met regularly across government, both at the Helmand executive group, which as you know was established down in Lashkar Gah, and the Kabul steering group in Kabul, which had myself as the commander of British Forces, the ambassador of the security services, and the DFID representative. We debated long and hard what we were being asked to do and we sought clarity across government, because everyone reported up to their various line managers and Ministers to find and request answers to our pressing questions.

Q29 Mr Havard: Okay. On the general heading of intelligence and this business of deciding what is strategic, operational, tactical and so on and how that is informed, you made some comments about what you thought were the military's capabilities and basing yourself out of Kandahar rather than any other previous process. I remember visiting you a couple of weeks before you went and then about three weeks after you had been there. I remember Charlie, your chief of staff—

Brigadier Butler: Charlie Williams.

Mr Havard: Yes. He was looking at his Toughbook and you had created a whole set of intelligence on who was who, where they were and all the rest of it. The intelligence that you had before you went on which you based your decision making about how to deploy was presumably not very good. You just heard Rory's questions to Sherard about how you get quality information so that you can make quality decisions. Have you got any comments about that?

Brigadier Butler: I think it is generally recognised by all that, before we deployed into Helmand in 2006, there was a dearth of intelligence, which there should not have been because throughout 2004 and 2005 there was very detailed special forces-gathered intelligence and security services intelligence, and very detailed reports were being written on that for their various organisations about the nature and structure of the Taliban and what the leadership was. We knew very clearly from the Quetta Shura that they were going to react and respond very vigorously to the arrival of British forces into Helmand. What happened to that intelligence, and why it did not feed into the various Government Departments, I am not sure and I find that is a major shortcoming.

The intelligence was there. Was it shared with us? We knew that there were Talib there—I say we as in 16 Brigade—and we knew that we were going to generate a pretty angry reaction. We were surprised by quite how violent that was—we made not a wrong assumption but a not substantial assumption on that. We knew full well and made very clear to PGHQ and others in 2005 and to every visitor who came into theatre that we had underestimated both the nature of the enemy, their response and their capabilities and the nature of the terrain, which was going to make it very hard to operate there.

Q30 Mr Havard: You have said that to us previously: you said that you had underestimated the environment and the reaction of the Taliban. What was interesting from the previous evidence was that presumably the pre-assessment team had a lot of that information and were

making recommendations on that. I think that evidence said that it would take 10 years to do it, but politically it was expected to be done in three years. What did you know of that?

Brigadier Butler: The shortcomings or where the fault lies for lack of accountability—both the preliminary operations teams, the special forces teams, who had been out in theatre, the individuals who pulled together the joint UK campaign plan for Helmand, all came up with the same sort of recommendations. They said that we were underestimating how long it was going to take; we did not have sufficient resources or know what was the actual mission going to be. All these points were very clearly made by December 2005. The question you would be right to ask was why were they not responded to, to say that this is something far greater than we thought and will require more resources or take more time or money? I asked and I certainly never got those questions answered.

Q31 Mr Havard: I was worried about whether there was a process to collect this information in the first place. You seem to be suggesting that there was a process to collect this information, so there was an assembly of a ground truth, but conveniently parts of it seem to have been ignored, rather than anything else. Was there a way of challenging this through the process you talk about—dissenters, if you like? How are you going to accommodate the bastards who are not on the plan, because they might be saying something very useful? Are you saying that these sorts of things are being ignored?

Brigadier Butler: Whether they were ignored or not fully understood, I think are two different points. I think the main repository for this and whether they got all of it from all Government sources was in the PGHQ. Did they have the time? Remember, in 2005 Iraq was not going to plan. There were a lot of other issues about their mental and physical capacity to start planning a very significant operation while another one was having the challenges it was. There were some human failings, which were not necessarily deliberate, but this information was there. The ground truth was very clearly laid out and those of us who had been in Afghanistan, either on reconnaissance trips or, in my case, having been there twice before, knew exactly what we were going to get into and made it very clear. I have notes from two reports I wrote as early as October 2005 which raise these issues.

Q32 Mr Havard: John Reid said to us when he came to give evidence last time that what we saw effectively were operational decisions—this is about moving north in Helmand, and so on—which had strategic consequences. The question is what is operational and what is tactical and what has a strategic consequence, if you like. Ultimately a fundamental change in the mission was taking place, because an operational decision now effectively affected the strategic decision in the first place and amended it. It therefore was not amended at the top deliberately, but had to be amended as a consequence of operational decisions. Is that fair? Is that what happened?

Brigadier Butler: I think the first point, and I am very happy to discuss it, is probably the nub of why you would like to hear my thoughts on this. The UK mission, which we finally got clarified and stated to us in 2006, was to conduct security and stabilisation operations within Helmand and wider Regional Command South, jointly with Afghan partners, other Government departments and multinational partners, in order to support the Government of Afghanistan, governance and development objectives. The mission was not changed by moving north. It was very clear and the very hard decisions we took on an hourly and daily basis with the Governor of Helmand, Governor Daoud, and with quite a lot of long

screwdriver from President Karzai, were that we were there to support the Government of Afghanistan and deliver development and security in governance. So the mission never changed.

The second point you raised is how was this decision taken and—I am going on your previous discussions—were politicians, ministers and senior military involved in this decision-making process? The answer is yes. Dr John Reid came out and visited me on 23 April. He had inherited this from his predecessor not that long before. For five days I stayed with him shoulder to shoulder, briefing him on what the issues were, what the challenges were, the lack of intelligence, the lack of a very clear mission, these competing missions. We also started discussing at that stage the whole issue of northern Helmand, delivering what became known as the Sangin effect. We always knew that Sangin was going to be an issue we were going to have to grapple with, even though it was outside the Afghan development zone—the triangle, as people referred to it. He was in no doubt when he left of the seriousness of the situation we had got into and what we were going to have to do about it. I would challenge those who would say that the Secretary of State at the time was not aware of what we were likely to have to do in order to fulfil our mission.

Q33 Mr Havard: Right, but then a new Secretary of State comes in.

Brigadier Butler: Yes.

Mr Havard: So you now have a different personality.

Brigadier Butler: I think an interesting point here is that I wonder how much, when one Secretary of State hands over the other, they actually discuss a very serious strategic national issue, how they have got there, what the plan is and what their views are. From my own observations and personal experience of politics, I think that you are out the door and into your new Department, or you are collecting your pension. I suggest that there might be something in this wider debate of political-military decision making that there isn't that handover of experience and knowledge and how we have got it—all the nuances and subtleties that have probably taken place outside Committee. When Des Browne arrived—I briefed him on 6 May when he came out—he had very little understanding of what Afghanistan was about, so over the five days I repeated with him the whole process that I had gone through with his predecessor—the nature of the problem and so on.

Q34 Mr Havard: But they are saying that they were making strategic decisions and you were making operational decisions that then affected the strategy. Is that right?

Brigadier Butler: No, I wouldn't put it quite like that, because pretty well every single visitor—certainly those visiting for the first time—had a very minimal understanding of what Afghanistan was, what we were trying to do, the resources that we had and the huge complexity of what we were dealing with: Afghan politics, tribal politics, a resurgent Taliban that some had underestimated, the sheer size of the geography and everything else. They came with a very basic level and went away much richer and wiser from the collective briefings that they had from not only the British but the Americans and the Afghan politicians in Kabul and down in Helmand.

Q35 Mr Havard: Do you think that there is a need for a new or changed process in terms of intelligence, or did the problem lie not there but in the decision making that came from the intelligence and who was involved in seeing it all?

Brigadier Butler: Well, like any investment decision, you need to have very good intelligence about the environment, the product and your competitors in order to feed and inform the right decisions that you can then resource to ensure that you can deliver both in time and within a casualty threshold, which is something that is never liked. We could have been, and need to be, much more businesslike in how we get into some of these significant strategic operations and campaigns and actually cost it for the likelihood. If you had said to us, 12 years and some £30 billion to £40 billion later, that that was how long it was going to take us to get out, disregarding whether we had achieved what we wanted to, I think that, in December 2005, people would have said, “We’re not going to do it.”

Q36 Mr Havard: So intelligence is the place to invest.

Brigadier Butler: It is one of the places to invest.

Q37 Chair: Before we move on, I want to pick you up on that final point. You just said that it is possible that if people in December 2005 had looked at the cost of it and known that they would have to deploy 32,000 international troops and 32,000 Afghans, and that by 2014 Sangin would be where it is, then they might have decided not to do it. Is it actually realistic to expect that John Reid or his successor would have been able to say in December 2005 or early 2006, “Hey, I don’t think this is going to work—we are not going to go into Helmand at all,” or, in fact, is the momentum of these kinds of wars so unstoppable that the Secretary of State can barely conceive of doing anything other than what he is doing?

Brigadier Butler: That is a very good point. By December 2005, the train had left the station, and it was then a question of how we could manage it. Our American colleagues, the Government Department and the military all had ambitions that were not necessarily focused on what the task, the requirement and the resource bill were going to be.

Q38 Mrs Moon: You have not mentioned the media in all this.

Brigadier Butler: No.

Mrs Moon: I wonder how much you feel that the media is also a driver behind the difficulties of actually saying, “No, this is wrong.” Is it actually too difficult to say “Stop!” and alter your decisions because of the push, push, push for different movements from within the media?

Brigadier Butler: I think we certainly got the media communications plan wrong. It should have started a lot earlier. I do not remember much noise in the media in 2005 and early 2006 about the whys and wherefores, whether this was the right thing and how long it was going to take, because I think we were still all-consumed by a frenetic 2005. It was politically frenetic, with what was happening with the Prime Minister, cash for honours, David Kelly’s suicide and Basra falling apart. Those were the stories that sold. I am speaking from memory so I may be wrong, but we did not have that media scrutiny in early 2006 to question what we were getting into. Public support, I seem to remember, was

about 30% in favour of this mission, and it then slid down to the low teens after a couple of years.

Where we failed, which I think was wrong, was with the strategy of not engaging the media. This was a conscious decision taken by the Government and, I think, the Ministry of Defence: we would not deal with the media using a more proactive engagement strategy when the challenges, the contacts, the body bags and everything else started coming home from the end of April through until the end of my time there. The media were prohibited from going forward and from talking to people, so we had a whole series of leakages coming through soldiers' mobile phones, calls home and letters, which the media then just fed on in a very febrile manner.

We failed there to really engage the media early on. Certainly we collectively could have done more to present to the more sophisticated media why we were there and what we were doing. There was a concern that, because at senior political and military level we did not really know what we were going to do, we could not clearly state what the mission was about or talk about this new aim of nation building without being prepared to answer very awkward questions about how long, how much and what cost in casualties. There was a real reticence, which I think was a mistake.

Q39 Richard Benyon: Can I ask you first to address the view held in some quarters that military people are from Venus and politicians are from Mars, and it is very hard to get a sensible decision made? As a platoon commander I would say to my company commander, "I think we should do this," and he would take a strategic military view and apply politics to it and then tell me not to be so stupid, and we would all get on with our lives. Would you agree that it is simplistic to try to distinguish two groups of people? Politicians, if they are intelligent and they understand and are able to talk to military people, are able to make a military decision with a political overlay. I will come on to ask you about the Sangin issue but, in the same way, you had to make a very political decision and were very influenced by a minute by minute emerging political situation in the Sangin area.

Brigadier Butler: I am not sure which is Venus and which is Mars in this example of politicians being from one and military from the other, because we are all intelligent human beings. I think there was a tendency which we saw—a previous speaker touched on this—of the military having become very sophisticated during its time in the Balkans and then Iraq and in the early stages in Afghanistan. I sense that there was probably some behaviour by some who would say that they knew better than their political masters. More importantly, touching on your point, one was always told to give politically aware military advice. That was a sort of saying. There was probably a shift, certainly at the senior level, that they were giving advice that was more political with less military awareness underneath it. That was starting to influence some of the decisions.

If people in these sorts of military situations could say, "You have asked me to look at a problem"—whether a Libya or a Syria—"and this is physically what we can do about it, this is how long it will take and this is what we will need," and be very clear on it then, to me, that would be a very simple and straightforward relationship. I think the politics, the tribalism, the agendas and the "Can we get a particular resource in through the back door of a UOR process?" probably influence some senior military officers more than others.

Q40 Richard Benyon: Let's turn to the situation in Sangin. Governor Daoud, whom you had a regard for—you thought he was clever—was on the phone to you, or coming to see you, and pleading with you that the situation was deteriorating there. It was very personal for him. You were being faced with a decision that you probably would not otherwise have wanted to take, but you were dealing with the realities on the ground, on the basis of good information. Is this right? You then made a decision, or a decision was made, and we would really like to understand more of the detail about how that decision was made—whether it had full buy-in, right up to the top, and whether the pressures that you were feeling on the ground were manageable in making the correct decision at the time.

Brigadier Butler: I think Governor Daoud was the right man, but at the wrong time. He was a clever, intelligent and very development-focused individual. He was probably brought in too early. We needed someone who really understood and had some form of power base and ability to control all the tribal issues, the warlordism and everything else.

Secondly, we replaced him too early, as you know. We built up his expectations and then he felt badly let down that between January and April, no British troops were there to support what he was trying to do. Then the reality was that from April to July, we were still flowing the force into theatre, so he didn't have the security support that had been promised to him by the other Government Departments.

In terms of the decision as to why we went into northern Helmand, who was informed and whether it went all the way to the top, I arrived in the first week of April. In the discussions I had with the embassy, the security services and the ambassador, we were very clear that we recognised that the Taliban, as we had already seen from January, had had time to re-equip and resource themselves and were going to take the fight to us. We knew we were going to be very vulnerable between April and July, when we had the full forces in place. We knew what all these issues were, and the reality, I think, started to hit people, certainly in theatre.

Governor Daoud was making it very clear when some of the northern towns fell—first of all when Baghran fell to the Taliban at the end of April—that we had to do something about it. He asked us to do it; we couldn't, so he sent a militia force up there, but we supported it with the Pathfinder Platoon. Then a couple of weeks later, Now Zad and Musa Qala—Musa Qala was first—were attacked by the Taliban. People were fleeing; people were being killed. This is where the constant demand on the taskforce to prevent the black flag of Mullah Omar from flying—that well used phrase—and to support Governor Daoud's governance and the mission came from. If we weren't here—going back to what our stated mission was by that stage—we may as well go home.

There was support to the Government and the Governor himself. There was provision of security. We had people being killed and men, women and children being displaced. We had the humanitarian issues of people having to leave their homes, and these were pretty impoverished towns and villages. They were being thrown out, so they were going to be suffering water and food shortages. We had medical cases where we had to go in and were requested to go in.

We were seen to be failing on every single one of the objectives within our mission—development, governance and security—and this pressure was every day from Governor Daoud. I would be going down to his office, in the Bost hotel, or one of my colleagues

would be down there, trying to negotiate with him and explain that we didn't have the forces to do this—we couldn't go up north; we were still flowing the forces into theatre. His impression was that we had 3,000 bayonets—3,000 fighting men. In fact, we only had 600, but it had been explained as a force of 3,000. He assumed that that was 3,000 Afghans with muskets, but actually it was not. All these things were compounded and the taskforce had to do something. In the discussions we had in the first Kabul steering group, one of the main conclusions was that doing nothing was not an option. We had to support the Government of Afghanistan; we had to start delivering our mission.

An important factor in this which I could see, as a tactical commander, was that if we just sat in our bases in Lashkar Gah, Gereshk and Bastion, the Talib would come and attack us there, which they already had done on two occasions. On the two first Fridays in April, they bombed Lashkar Gah PRT. So there was a cause and effect by going north. We had to do it, from a mission perspective, but it also kept us free from attacks and gave us the ability to let the force flow into theatre.

Chair: This is fascinating, but we really have to focus on the way that decisions are made. You have given very good and comprehensive testimony on the details of the decisions, but can we bring it back to the question of how these decisions were made rather than what was wrong with them?

Q41 Richard Benyon: I am keen to know if there was a dissenting view when you went back to your colleagues or up the chain of command.

Brigadier Butler: No. These decisions were discussed in Lashkar Gah at the Helmand executive group, which was cross-Government—albeit there were only one or two from the FCO and DFID there. They were discussed on a weekly basis in the Kabul steering group, which was the ambassador, myself, the head of the security services and the head of DFID. We constantly discussed what we were going to be doing. The Kabul steering group linked up, when technology allowed, with the Afghan steering group, which was here in London and was, again, a cross-party committee.

The chain of command, which is the term you use, was pretty free-flowing. It was going upwards and coming downwards on a daily basis. I wrote weekly reports and spoke pretty well every other day to PJHQ at two-star general level. I sat in on the weekly conferences. We were very clear at every stage of this period from mid to late April, when Baghran fell, that if we were going to fulfil our mission, we were going to have to deploy north. Anyone who says that they were not aware either militarily or politically is, I would say, incorrect.

Q42 Bob Stewart: Ed, talking about the chain of command precisely, which is what we are very interested in, as I understand it, the pre-operational deployment teams on which you briefed us before suggested that it was not a good idea to go into Helmand. A special force report suggested that there would be a firestorm if we did. The diplomatic channels, as expressed by Sherard earlier, were saying, "It's a kibosh, the whole thing." Your feeling, from October 2005, was that this could be extremely difficult indeed. Those were all the signals going back up the chain of command.

What I am particularly interested in is who it was, where it was and at what level. Did it go right to the Prime Minister's office? Was Prime Minister Blair really impressed by the shiny buttons of the generals coming in? The advice was, "Be very careful about an operation of

deployment into Helmand,” so at what level was it changed? Forgive me for going on, but you have already stated that you briefed John Reid and he was fully aware of it, yet we had the comment about hoping to get out “without a shot being fired”. I know that you probably cannot be definitive, but where was that advice turned around and where were you told to get on with it?

Brigadier Butler: There are two parts to that, if I understand you correctly. One is: how high up did it go? I certainly reported directly to PJHQ. PJHQ received my weekly briefs and monthly reports in the run-up to the deployment. From my knowledge, it certainly went into PJHQ. It would have then been briefed up into commitment staff in the MOD, so that they had full visibility of it. I would imagine, though I was never there, that it was briefed to the chiefs. So from a military perspective, in 2005, from my knowledge and understanding of the system, it certainly went right up into the MOD. You would have to ask more senior officers at the time what was then done with that information and those concerns about resources and everything else we have covered.

I also briefed a number of other tri-service senior officers down in Colchester at the end of 2005 and in 2006, and I still have on record who I spoke to. I never had to make up any new issues, because they were always the same from the word go. To me, within the military chain of command, there was total visibility. I can only comment on the politicians who came and saw us, whether it was Dr Reid, Des Browne, Hilary Benn or a plethora of other visitors; they had the same, consistent message from us. So politically, everyone was aware of it. Everyone in the formal briefing chain, up through the various steering groups, from Helmand into Kabul and into London, was aware of it. I think your bigger question is, if everyone was aware of it, why was nothing done about it?

Bob Stewart: That is exactly it.

Brigadier Butler: Some of that has been discussed. We wanted to be supporting our American colleagues. The 9/11 reasons—that we wanted to be there, shoulder to shoulder—were still paramount. People you have talked to have said that yes, some saw a requirement that the military had to be engaged in an operation. There were concerns about further defence cuts. You don’t have standing armies doing nothing in peacetime; they are very expensive. I think there was a collection and a series of influences that were fuelling the train and made it unstoppable.

No one ever said to me, “Ed, we are not going to do this”. There was never any question. The closest that came was when John Reid said we were going to pause the operation from a start date in January until April to ensure—I think this was absolutely right—that the Dutch came in to Uruzgun, because if we had had a split in the coalition, we would have been vulnerable from a tactical perspective, but also politically. If the Dutch had held up a red card and not gone in, would we have still gone in? I don’t know. That would be something we would have to guess about.

Q43 Bob Stewart: You haven’t mentioned President Karzai. Did he have big influence on you on the ground? Was he, through Governor Daoud, saying, “For goodness’ sake, get on with it”?

Brigadier Butler: Yes, in terms of mobile phone communications and the decision-making process, Daoud would have regular conversations and we would get feed-out from

that. Karzai was very clever at briefing across the coalition about who was doing what and who wasn't doing what. He was a very clever man at that. I met him probably six or seven times, and he was pretty clear what he wanted the British to do. The train leaving the station was part of it, because we'd made it very clear in 2001 and 2002 that we were going to support President Karzai.

We could have delayed it, but in all reality I don't think that would have had an impact. We could have delayed it by a year to understand more what was going on and what we had to do, and to make a proper investment appraisal. However, even delaying it by a year, the arrival of the ARRC and General Richards' headquarters was probably driving the UK decision that we had to be in, with boots on the ground, to underpin the first NATO operation outside Europe post-9/11. There was a collection of all these strategic drivers. That is what may have clouded people's judgments, decisions and analysis of what was being said at a tactical level.

Q44 Dr Lewis: You mentioned that visitors coming out to theatre had very little grasp of the complexities involved. In particular, when a new Defence Secretary came out, you realised, having briefed the previous one, that there had been no handover briefing and that you had to start all over again. It was back to square one. I appreciate that when theatre commanders hand over to their successors, they do brief each other. But given that this was such a complex situation and given that theatre commanders have a great deal of power over what goes on in the area for which they have responsibility, do you think it was sensible that theatre commanders were themselves being changed, I believe, every six months? Was that a reasonable way of doing it, and did it provide sufficient continuity?

Brigadier Butler: I think I will caveat my comment by saying that I didn't get the impression that Des Browne had been briefed by his predecessor; there might have been a short conversation, but it was pretty clear to me that his understanding—or lack of understanding—of what we were campaigning about, the complexities and everything else was at a low level. On your point about six-month tours and the short tour-ism approach that the British military had, we were commenting at the time that we should do longer. Our American colleagues always looked at us, saying, "Look, you're not taking this seriously, because you're only here for six months; how can you understand it?"

In September I posed, although not in a particularly serious manner—as in serious staffing—"Actually, you know what? I should probably be staying on here; I am just starting to really understand the personalities, the issues and everything else." There is a tendency within the military that a commander can't command someone else's brigade, but I commanded 3 Commando Brigade for over a week while their commander came in and it was a pretty seamless thing. They would come in and replace my staff on a rolling basis, and it worked fine. But the tribalism that Sherard talked about before is probably not going to be allowed.

On a wider point, which I made very clear at the end of 2005 and in early 2006, I was surprised about, and made the case against, the fact that I wouldn't be commanding my brigade; a Joint Force Headquarters or permanent headquarters should have gone in and carried on from its planning for preliminary operations, which was made up of the Joint Force Headquarters. That should have carried on further, throughout 2006.

Q45 Dr Lewis: I just want to cut back to the main point. I appreciate that in what are arguably described as “wars of choice”, it is probably necessary that the majority of front-line troops are out there for a more limited period—and six months is quite a long time—than in a war of national survival. But does it make sense for the theatre commander in such a complex environment to be rotated every six months in the way that happened? I get the impression from your answer that you think, given the powers that theatre commanders have, that continuity would require them to stay on longer even though the front-line troops were being rotated.

Brigadier Butler: Yes, I will be clear. You are absolutely right. To ask soldiers to stay on the front line for pretty well an unbroken six months, in those conditions—well, they’d fall apart. You’re absolutely right; I would still hold now that to have a six-month tour at the command level—at a senior or more tactical level—is too short.

Q46 Derek Twigg: Brigadier, one of the advantages of visiting the operational theatre and the front line is obviously to get information. If we go back to the Clemenceau analogy, clearly we do not expect Ministers to go out every week and spend time sitting there overnight in front of machine guns and so forth, but I have two quick questions. Often, when I went out to theatre, I was told that I couldn’t go to certain places because it was too dangerous—which obviously is a clue. But when I got there, a number of commanders on the ground said, “Oh no, we could have facilitated that.” So it is the Cabinet Office that seems to be stopping this. Have you got any comments on the importance of Ministers being able to go out and get information at first hand?

Linking in with that, were you as the commander ever told that you couldn’t speak or give certain information to Ministers? Was pressure ever put on you not to say certain things to Ministers when they visited you in theatre?

Brigadier Butler: No, I would actively encourage the ultimate decision-makers who are co-ordinating, planning and making decisions about a significant campaign to be out there and actually taste the front line; to be able not just to talk to the troops but to experience the conditions and talk to the people we are trying to look after. The further forward you can get, the better. The duty of care and health and safety issues are a different matter, and that is probably the cloak that gets put around it.

Q47 Derek Twigg: On balance, you would say that it is more important for Ministers to go out there,

Brigadier Butler: I would do, yes. The challenge that DFID and the FCO had, as you know, was they couldn’t leave Lashkar Gah.

On whether I was ever told not to brief certain things to Ministers, the answer is no. I think that I probably had a reputation for being fairly outspoken, and I always used to tell it how it was. I think that was based on the privileged position I had as a special forces commander. Certainly, commanding the SAS I was able to talk and brief the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Secretary of State in person about missions we were going to take. They always wanted a frank opinion about success and failure: could we do it? How could we do it? What did we need to have? I was never told not to say something. I am aware of other situations where in-theatre commanders were told not to bring other things up.

Q48 Derek Twigg: You look like you have an example.

Brigadier Butler: During certain operations where a theatre commander would have wanted more troops, he was requested not to bring it up with the Minister because it was being dealt with by the MOD in a different way.

Q49 John Woodcock: To be clear, you think that the suggestion we were given in the evidence earlier from Sir Sherard, that we were all indulging in mass self-deception, is wrong?

Brigadier Butler: There was certainly no self-deception for those of us who had been there before and those who had been engaged in the planning process at a tactical level—16 Brigade and the people engaged in the joint campaign plan for Helmand prelim ops. I think there probably was—it was an interesting term—some self-denial and self-deception that we could still see this thing through and we could deliver some form of success.

The military were probably more pragmatic. DFID, if I may say so, had some utopian ideals of what they thought Afghanistan could be turned into, certainly with the time and resources available. From a governance perspective, we could have really understood and read our history books, and recognised that, with the complete dearth of any human capacity and capability at the national and local level, it was going to take a very long time to deliver governance. Governor Daoud had one official to support him, for example.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time, but I am afraid we now need to move on to our final session.

Brigadier Butler: Thank you.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Lieutenant General (Retd) Sir Robert Fry KCB CBE** and **Mr Desmond Bowen**, former Director General of Policy, Ministry of Defence, gave evidence.

Chair: Welcome to our witnesses. Sir Bob Russell is going to lead the questioning.

Q50 Sir Bob Russell: Gentlemen, you have sat in and heard a fair amount. My first question is going to focus on the decision to deploy to Helmand province. The questions after that will relate to the decision to move to northern Helmand, but at the moment the focus is just on the principle of going into Helmand.

General Fry, you have previously commented that in early 2004, the NATO campaign looked moribund. How did that impact the decision to move into northern Helmand, and what had been the British strategy for Afghanistan?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: Maybe I can go back to 2001—I really think I have to if we are to have any sense of the wholeness of not only the Afghan campaign but the concurrency between Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2001, immediately after 9/11, the situation was, in many ways, clearer than it has ever been since. There was something going on in Afghanistan that, arguably, required an almost non-discretionary intervention. NATO article 5 was invoked and the Americans got involved on the ground, and we did pretty soon after that.

I think it was in December of 2001 that the Bonn conference was convened. That put Karzai in an interim position, which was subsequently confirmed by an electoral process. I guess that in early 2002, we probably had Afghanistan in as good a position as we were ever going to have it, in so far as there were three things in place that have never been in place subsequently. First, it had the undivided attention of the international community. Secondly, the Taliban was scattered, either back to its villages or into Pakistan. Thirdly, the Pakistanis were being helpful. Had we chosen at that stage determinedly to prosecute a campaign throughout the whole of Afghanistan, I suspect that we would probably have been successful in reasonably short order. We chose not to do that. We became distracted by the siren call of Iraq.

In addition to that, we had created—this was highly invidious—two separate campaigns inside Afghanistan. There was a NATO campaign, which was essentially about building the institutions of the state and creating the mechanisms of Government, and there was an American campaign that was about killing terrorists. Those two things were fundamentally antithetical. If you drop a bomb on a village as part of the American campaign, that is hardly conducive to gaining political support. So we were creating tensions already.

We then put ourselves in the worst of all possible positions; we did not renounce a responsibility to Afghanistan but we only devoted a relatively trifling level of resources to it. We set up the PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif. We then got involved with the invasion of Iraq for reasons that seemed compelling at the time. Pretty soon, those reasons looked significantly less compelling when it became obvious that there were no weapons of mass destruction and there were no obvious links with terrorism.

Q51 Chair: General, I am so sorry to interrupt, but we have 35 minutes to get both of you in. We really cannot go all the way back to that history, I am afraid.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: Okay. Let me just try to outline the situation immediately after that. We are in Iraq and we realise that the strategic reasons why we went there are fallacious, and therefore the primary function of being in Iraq is to return a functioning polity back to the Iraqi people. At the same time, we had left Afghanistan in a position where Karzai's position was tenuous; a NATO mission was going to be highly problematic and quite possibly could fail; we had the NATO mission and the American mission not running in any way in a complementary manner; and we had divided Afghanistan into two—in the north, the Northern Alliance, and in the south what amounted to Pashtunistan.

At that time, it became clear that we had to make a decision about which of the two theatres we should place our main effort in. The main effort went into Afghanistan, mainly into Helmand. As far as Helmand is concerned, we could have gone to only two provinces: either Helmand or Kandahar. The Americans had the south-eastern part of the country, and all the other provinces were insignificant in size and the responsibility that they represented. The Canadians had already been to Kandahar in 2001 and knew the area. The Canadians also had been out of international military deployments for some time and felt that they wanted to rehabilitate themselves.

Q52 Chair: General, I am so sorry to keep interrupting. Just to step back for one second, we are really keen to look at how decisions were made, not the rationale for the decisions. Primarily the Committee today is not interested in why you went to Helmand and whether

that was the right decision. What we are interested in is who made those decisions and to what extent information was shared in the system.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: On the basis of all the factors that I have just enumerated, a paper called “Why Helmand?” was written in the Ministry of Defence and was taken by the Chiefs of Staff committee. On the basis of that—Desmond will put me straight on this—a recommendation was made to the Prime Minister’s office that said that Helmand was the place that we needed to go.

Q53 Sir Bob Russell: Mr Bowen, is there any aspect of what we have heard that you fundamentally disagree with, or is that how you see it as well?

Desmond Bowen: I would say two things. One is that this was not Britain alone; it was NATO. If we were going to diminish our contribution, there were 27 other allies to play their part. There was very much a notion that this was a NATO operation, and I think it is unwise to forget that. On the other point about the decision making—the Chairman talked about decision making—my recollection, and I have not tried to refresh my memory, is that there was quite a long drawn-out process that was based in the Cabinet Office, with the Secretary of State for Defence being the Minister in charge of this process. In the Cabinet Office, there was a series of meetings organised by somebody who would now be called the Deputy National Security Adviser, involving all the different Departments, which was running through all the different angles in order to come to a conclusion on whether this was the right thing to do and whether it was going to succeed. It is just not the case that it was a kind of “on the back of a fag packet” decision. There was a process and it was a very deliberate process.

Q54 Sir Bob Russell: Before I move on to the next question, I would observe that although you refer to 20-plus countries on this NATO mission, not all of them deployed troops to Helmand province.

Desmond Bowen: No, I agree, absolutely, but that is an important point to understand. The number of countries that were prepared to go to the south was very limited. When the NATO decision was made to have this backward clock deployment from the north round to the west and then to the south, there was a question as to who was going to, as it were, invigorate or populate it. It was very clear that the French weren’t going to do it, the Italians weren’t going to do it and the Spanish weren’t going to do it. There were a few people, like the Danes and the Estonians, who were up for it with the British, but you are absolutely right that the number of countries that are prepared to put their troops in harm’s way, in the interests of delivering the policy that has been agreed on, is quite small. We could decide to do it differently. I agree.

Q55 Sir Bob Russell: Was the British mission in Helmand predominantly counter-narcotics, counter-insurgency or to give a boost to the wider alliance effort?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: There was confusion about it. There was confusion as it went through the campaign. Fundamentally this was a counter-insurgency campaign. There were other elements of this which were adjacent to that.

I need to explain this in a tiny bit of detail. The great gap at that time, which I think has subsequently been addressed, was that, at the heart of Government, there was nothing

which joined various Departments together. Various Departments would meet in ad hoc groups. There would be one institution—the Chiefs of Staff Committee—which would meet weekly and would be attended by other Departments, but it had no executive function. It has become clear to me subsequently—and it was becoming increasingly clear to me at the time—that unless national strategy is supervised by the head of the executive function of Government, it won't work. Government Departments will simply plough their own furrows and there is nothing to bring all the dimensions of national power together in a unified strategic purpose. If you don't bring all those things together, you don't actually have grand strategy

Q56 Sir Bob Russell: So, very briefly, the objective was not clear.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: Very briefly, the objective was conflicting. For the Ministry of Defence it was clearly a counter-insurgency campaign; for the Home Office it might have had counter-narcotic overtones; for DFID it might have been the rights of women, but all of these were involved in a dialogue across Whitehall which didn't have any fundamental discipline or structure about it.

Q57 Sir Bob Russell: Mr Bowen, do you have any thoughts beyond what we just heard?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: Well, I think that the creation of the National Security Council was highly timely and was the necessary reform to address the issues that I have just been speaking about.

Sir Bob Russell: Sorry, I was asking Mr Bowen; do you have any thoughts beyond that?

Desmond Bowen: Somebody has referred to the famous infamous comment—and has misquoted it, as ever—that Dr Reid made, about hoping to be able to leave Helmand without firing a shot. I think the object of what he was trying to say—and he has tried to correct this on the Floor of the House—is that there is a difference between a counter-terrorism campaign, which the Americans are running, and a counter-insurgency campaign. We were in the business of counter-insurgency. In that counter-insurgency campaign you have to bring others along with you from the Home Departments, which is why there was a process in Whitehall to do just that. I think it is fair to say—and this is already public—that the Secretary of State for Defence at the time made it plain that he wanted to be absolutely clear that DFID was going to play fully in this process, that the Treasury was supportive of it and that the Foreign Office was likewise alongside. This was not going to be the Ministry of Defence being hung out to dry.

Q58 Sir Bob Russell: That answer leads neatly into my next question, which I think gets rights to the nub of what our inquiry is all about. Lord Reid, the former Secretary of State, expressed surprise that the military had moved into northern Helmand when he had been briefed that Governor Daoud's request for unsustainable operations should be resisted. Lord Browne, the Secretary of State who followed him, appears not to have been consulted on that decision. Why, in your opinion, were Ministers not consulted about the decision to move into northern Helmand?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: To be entirely honest, I cannot tell you. I was in Baghdad at the time and had my hands full with other things. It is inconceivable that a subject of that significance was not briefed to Ministers.

Sir Bob Russell: Thank you. Mr Bowen?

Desmond Bowen: I don't know. I wasn't holding the dossier for operations at that time; someone else was doing that. My view is that the decision to move and effectively change the task to create platoon houses was taken at a tactical level but was actually a strategic decision. Whether that was briefed up the line and at some stage someone cut it off or whether, actually, it was not briefed up the line because it seemed like a decision for mission command and the local commander, I do not know. It is a really difficult question. It is the Rumsfeld point about, "Stuff happens". It is a question of someone actually clocking that the stuff happening is of strategic importance and is not just about tactical decisions.

Q59 John Woodcock: I want to briefly clarify this before Julian comes in. You say, General Fry, that it was inconceivable, but Lord Browne has been clear before this Committee that he was not briefed in advance. He has said that it was an operational decision. You said that that was inconceivable, and Mr Bowen talked about not being sure where this effectively got blocked in the system. Clearly, for both of you, it was the wrong call because this had strategic implications that Lord Browne was not told of in advance.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: I cannot begin to say what Lord Browne said; I would not dream of doing that for one second.

Q60 John Woodcock: He is on the record here saying that he was not briefed in advance.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: That is fine; that is his experience of it. As I said, I cannot speak from the record. I cannot speak as a participant in the events. I had nothing to do with it. My judgment—that is all I can give you in this case—is that something of that significance would most likely have been briefed to Ministers.

Q61 John Woodcock: I am not being clear in my questions. It has been established that it was not briefed, so I am not asking you to verify the facts. By you saying that it was inconceivable—your view, looking in from the outside but nevertheless having had very close experience of this, is that it would have been the wrong call if that was what happened.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: If they were not briefed, that was certainly the wrong call.

Q62 Mr Havard: So the NSC would have made it all different, would it? Is that the organisational change that would have made this different—that we now have the NSC? We need greater clarity now.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: The NSC would have made a big difference in the whole of the campaign planning. It would have drawn these various dimensions together in a way that would have had a much more compound effect than we had. But I do not think that that is necessarily germane to the question that I have just been asked.

Desmond Bowen: This is about judgment. When Governor Daoud says to Brigadier Butler, "My God. I've got Government offices that are going to be overrun. Aren't you here to help the Afghan Government reassert itself in the south? I need some help," that is a moment where one needs to understand what the local commander is confronted with, what his thinking is, whom he consults and how far up it goes. Someone somewhere, I

would suggest, should have said, “This is going to have serious implications in how we deploy our troops and whether we’ve got enough. We’re going to lose flexibility and manoeuvre because we’re going to be fixed. Do we have the right composition of force to do a task which is actually different from what was originally conceived?” For someone, somewhere, some time in the chain, that judgment has to click in. Who is it? Is it someone looking at a television programme who says, “We need to understand this”?

Is it someone on the ground either in Helmand or in Kandahar?

These situations are actually arising quite a lot of the time in less dramatic fashion. Most of the time these things get caught and someone says, “We need to flag this up. We need to understand this”. All I would say is that there was a moment when there should have been briefing to Ministers and Ministers should have been asked to endorse or decide otherwise.

Q63 Dr Lewis: I don’t know where to start with the shambles of what should be a fairly clear chain of command from the Prime Minister at the top to the theatre commander, not at the bottom, but at the bottom of this particular chain. Anyone who looks at the way campaigns were conducted in the Second World War would be impressed by the fact that this was a huge series of operations overseen by a tiny organisation, the Chiefs of Staff Committee. Embedded within was the Prime Minister’s permanent representative—in that case, Sir Hastings Ismay. Where necessary the Prime Minister would meet with the Chiefs of Staff in a staff conference. There is nothing like that in this arrangement, is there?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: That is one of the points I have already made to the Committee. I think that unless the head of the Executive is directly involved in these things—

There is a qualitative difference. The Second World War was a war of national survival. You have already used the phrase. Afghanistan and Iraq are arguably discretionary operations. It certainly didn’t occupy every minute of every day of the Prime Minister, so perhaps those comparisons are not entirely appropriate. However, there was a military chain of command that went from the Prime Minister to the Chief of the Defence Staff to the Chief of Joint Operations and into the deployed forces in the field. That was entirely clear and it worked well within the military dimension. What I think failed, and failed signally, was the ability to combine that with all the other instruments of national power which should have been part of a co-ordinated strategy.

Q64 Dr Lewis: And what would have been the vehicle for combining those things?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: Something that was built around the Prime Minister’s Office—what has subsequently become the National Security Council. Now, that has had some perhaps ambiguous outings in Iraq and Syria, but I think that both Afghanistan and Iraq were far larger enterprises involving other elements of Government that simply weren’t brought together in the proper way.

Q65 Dr Lewis: Let me then move to the existing National Security Council. If, as Dai said in his brief intervention, the National Security Council had been in place in this scenario or were to be in place in a similar scenario in the future, is it sufficiently constituted to keep a tight

grip at the appropriate strategic level, or does it only engage in general view assessments of a given theatre?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: I have not had enough first-hand experience to know. I will give you a judgment. If the authority of the Prime Minister is communicated to a Secretary of State—that he or she should do a certain thing in support of an overall strategy—it has much more chance of getting done than if that leverage did not exist. At the time these things were occurring, there was no direct mechanism or structure in place to permit that to happen.

Q66 Dr Lewis: Let us just look at a couple of different levels of decision and see where you think they were taken and where you think they should have been taken. Let us start at a fairly low level and imagine that you are in the theatre and a suggestion has been made, from whatever source, that our forces ought to engage in poppy eradication. On the other hand, there might be a school of thought that says, if you engage in poppy eradication, you are going to upset an awful lot of poppy farmers, some of whom will either join or, at the very least, support the insurgents as a result. It is completely irrelevant which side of that argument is correct; as the Chairman keeps pointing out, we are not here to make judgments about who was right and wrong in this campaign. But in the event that a decision had to be taken—shall we have a poppy eradication campaign in our theatre or not?—who would have taken that decision then and whom do you think would or should take it now?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: I think both then and now the person who would finally take that decision was probably the local military commander. However, then he would only have done that had he taken the advice of the DFID representative and the other people who were there. What I think probably worked quite well at a theatre level did not, I think, work terribly well at a Government level. So I don't think there was necessarily a mechanism for that to be done quickly and efficiently within the mechanism of Government at the time.

Q67 Dr Lewis: Judging by the example of the Second World War campaigns, where theatre commanders had much bigger theatres but they were allowed a tremendous amount of authority in-theatre—and you are basically saying that the same would and should apply in these smaller theatres—it was possible to wage a strategic war with a chain of command to the top, and yet with the theatre commander allowed to take major decisions with the best advice. So you would say that the parallel has held up quite well in this mini-campaign in Afghanistan, compared with what happened in the war of survival?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: With one major proviso—who was the theatre commander in Afghanistan? It was invariably an American, with the one exception of General Richards. Therefore, what you had was an American campaign within which you had a British implant. This created all sorts of complications. What you just described is absolutely truthful, but it was a much clearer and more elegant command solution than the one we have been operating in for the last few years.

Dr Lewis: That is very helpful. Mr Bowen, would you like to come in?

Desmond Bowen: There are two points worth making. It is part of the raw complexity. This wasn't just the Brits playing; it wasn't even just NATO playing. The Afghans had a say in this. The Afghans were conducting poppy eradication. One of the links that is

broken and has been broken is between the international force operating in the interests of counter-insurgency—which needs to be linked directly to the domestic Government: the Karzai Government or successor Governments. Bringing those two bits together is extremely difficult. So, my point is that a lot of the poppy eradication stuff was being done by local people with tractors. Now, maybe there was influence that could be brought to bear to say, “Desist, and let’s not do this this week”, or maybe, “Put it off to somewhere else.”

There is another point, of course. I remember being involved in some of the debate about narcotics. The actual eradication was probably not a sensible focus. It was much more important—and this is a decision that needed to be made—that the focus needed to be on the people at the top end of the chain who were financing and trafficking, not on the farmers at the bottom end. It took too long to get to the point of understanding the difference between those two.

Q68 Dr Lewis: I must let others come in, but I just wanted to go one step further, because I think we really are quite close to the heart of this problem. Here were the British, in a theatre with their own commanders who were rotating every six months; I think we heard from Ed Butler that that was too short a period and I would be interested if you had a view on that. However, you have now introduced the key point: that we were junior partners in the theatre with a senior ally.

Surely the way the system should have worked was that if people, from our commander downward in the theatre, felt that the strategy was wrong, they should have been able to report up a clear chain of command to the Defence Secretary and to the Prime Minister, who would then talk to his opposite number in America and argue the case at that top level that the strategy should be changed. Because otherwise we find ourselves in this situation, do we not, where our people on the ground are pursuing a strategy in which they do not believe but which they feel they cannot report up the chain to the only people who might be able to get it changed by negotiation with our allies?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: I completely disagree with the last point that you made. I don’t think that there was a large body of people who fundamentally disagreed with the strategy that they were being asked to enact.

I must not get too semantic about this whole thing, but it is what command is really about. Command is about the authorship and execution of a plan within a campaign. That always fell to the Americans, with the one exception of David’s, which I have said. Command, in the more formal sense of who sends the rations and who ensures that all the things happen, was retained here.

Command is a fundamental conundrum for us in coalition operations. We created this man called the Chief of Joint Operations, who is supposed to do exactly what the title says. This is a man who becomes habituated to command and, as a result of some of the things we were involved in, over the years we felt that that was the appropriate solution, but it only works if he is exercising command within the theatre. The minute that that is given to somebody else, you create this disjunction. I think there is still a reporting line for anyone with a grouse on the ground to put that through to the Chief of Joint Operations. He can pursue that, if he thinks it is appropriate, but he is not the man on a day-to-day basis who is guiding the fate of the campaign. That was the American commander.

Q69 John Woodcock: Can I just take us back to the decision to go into northern Helmand? Between you, you have described a scenario where the most likely driver by far was a sort of benign failure, if I can characterise it as that. The information should have been passed on, but in the heat of decision making it did not happen. It was not quite clear who ought to have done it, and perhaps that has now been clarified. That was an oversight, but it was no more than that.

Can I ask you for your views on the possibility, which is at least implied by some of Lord Reid's past evidence to the Committee, that this was not a benign oversight but a deliberate omission—not to put the decision to Lord Browne when he came in? In my mind the reasons for questioning that are, first, that it seems to be Lord Reid's view and, secondly, that he is clear that he was briefed on whether to go into northern Helmand. This is not something that suddenly arose as a possibility. It had been in the system as a possibility for some time. Added into that was the pressure, as it was described, from Governor Daoud wanting this to happen and threatening to go up the political chain of command in the UK, bypassing the military, if it did not happen. Is that an unrealistic scenario?

Desmond Bowen: Just to be clear, are you saying that it was in the mind of the military always to go to northern Helmand and that that was obscured from Ministers?

John Woodcock: I am not saying that; I am asking what you think of it as a possible scenario. I am not saying it was always in mind; I am entirely unable to make a judgment as to when that could have been formulated as the right thing to do. I am saying that it had been a possibility for some time. It was not a snap decision that simply was not escalated up to the Secretary of State.

Desmond Bowen: First, you say it was an oversight; I would say it was a failure. Let's be clear: things should have happened that did not happen. In terms of whether it was a deliberate omission, I find that an incredible allegation. I do not think that civil servants or military people behave like that. It would be culpable behaviour by those on the ground deliberately to omit to pass it up the chain because that was convenient or whatever.

As to whether the hypothesis that you set out is conceivable, I do not think it is. It only took a matter of hours and days before these luckless people in Musa Qala, Sangin and elsewhere were being besieged. The idea that the military would have wanted to bring that on without adequate resources and without being sure about their resupply—there are all sorts of issues about ammunition, CASEVAC and that sort of stuff that arose very quickly. It would have been a singularly inept piece of skulduggery to bring this upon yourself, when you knew that you had a force of only 3,000, of which only about a battalion's worth were bayonet troops.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: I don't think that military adventurism played a role in this, but it might have done. However, even if it did, all those decisions were reversible. This was the deployment of a relatively small number of people in the first instance. I suspect that the Secretary of State would have noticed that at some stage, and certainly others around him would have noticed as well. If he felt that this was fundamentally the wrong decision, he could at that stage have reversed it.

John Woodcock: Really?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: Yes.

Q70 John Woodcock: Yes, in terms of direct theoretical levers that could be pulled; but surely not in terms of everything that we have described so far about the pressure to be seen to be team players, or of the very strong political message—or indeed military message—sent by withdrawing from an area into which you had just gone. I am not disputing most of what you said, but surely that part, that in effect it could be reversed—

Desmond Bowen: But that is exactly what happened.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: Exactly. If we are team players, there is a team captain. I, as a service officer, and Desmond, as an official, are part of a process that reports to elected representatives, and they make the decisions. Not everyone has an equal vote in this. If the Secretary of State or any Minister wants to make an intervention, that is decisive. It is the role of me or of Desmond to say, “These are the things that you need to think about”, but the choice is theirs and only theirs. He could have reversed that decision if he had thought it was the wrong one.

Q71 Derek Twigg: I assume that neither of you believe that the military or civil servants were blameless and without any errors or faults during the whole of that decision-making process. What do you feel could have been, and could be, improved to ensure that we get better decision making?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: I have already given you one, which is part of the changing of the deckchairs in Whitehall—

Derek Twigg: We understand that, but that is going to happen anyway.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: The second fundamental thing is never to put yourself in a situation of strategic overreach. Why was all this so difficult—

Derek Twigg: I am talking about the military and the civil service.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: Indeed.

Q72 Derek Twigg: So are you saying that the military overreached themselves deliberately, or unknowingly?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: Collectively, the military, the civil service and the Government decisively overreached themselves. We had a campaign in Afghanistan that we gave up on; we went to Iraq and found that we had released energies that we could neither comprehend nor control; and all of a sudden we had more—

Q73 Derek Twigg: Do you feel anything else could have been done better?

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: No, but I think that that is a pretty significant issue.

Derek Twigg: I am just trying to get to the issue. So we’ve got the two things that you feel could have been done much better.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: Yes, and from those two things lots of the other complications arose. Those two things together created an awful lot of friction within the system.

Q74 Derek Twigg: Mr Bowen, what about the civil service?

Desmond Bowen: Clearly, lots of things could have been done better.

Derek Twigg: This is about decision making, so give us a couple of examples of where you think things could have been improved.

Desmond Bowen: I suppose the thing that still perplexes me, which I have mentioned before, is the enormous difficulty of harmonising what an intervention force were doing with what the political—

Derek Twigg: I am talking about the civil service. What could the civil service have done better?

Desmond Bowen: There is always more bringing together and directing that can be done. Robert has talked about this, but what you need when you get Departments with their own budgets under the constitutional settlement is cohesion between those Departments in order to achieve an outcome. Actually, you need ministerial clout to do that. At the beginning of this Helmand business, the idea was to bring Ministers together to do just that, but I guess you need more consistent engagement throughout the campaign, not just in the run-up to a decision.

Q75 Chair: All the way through this session there has been a disagreement between people who said, “There has been bad briefing to Ministers. Ministers didn’t know what they were doing”, and other people who said, “Good briefing to Ministers, but Ministers made the wrong call.” Is there not an underlying possibility that Britain deluded itself into believing that it could make an independent strategic decision? Really, this was an American decision. The momentum was unstoppable—we were going to go along with the United States anyway. Even if Ministers and generals had been perfectly informed and even if you had all concluded that the whole thing was a disaster, by January 2006 it was going to happen anyway, independent of the information that you received, because of your obligations to the United States.

Lt General Sir Robert Fry: I fundamentally disagree with what you have just said. I do not think that this was going to happen under any circumstances. The Americans were entirely uninterested in Afghanistan at that time. I think it was the British who made this happen and it was the British who dragged the Americans in. To that extent, we seem to have displayed an autonomous and independent capacity to make up our own minds.

Chair: With that great, provocative statement, we draw the session to a close, with many thanks for your time and to the Committee.