



Defence Committee

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

Tuesday 6 January 2015

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Members present: Rory Stewart (Chair), Richard Benyon, Mr Dai Havard, Dr Julian Lewis, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Ms Gisela Stuart, Derek Twigg

Questions 76 - 177

Witness[es]: Dr Howells, former Foreign Office Minister, gave evidence.

Q76 Chair: Dr Howells, thank you for coming, and our apologies that we are a little late starting. We are now into the second evidence session on decision making in defence policy. We are looking not so much to pin blame specifically on the past, but to think about lessons for the future and whether decision making in the UK system works, how it could be improved, how it did not work in the past and what suggestions you might have. Thank you very much for coming. For the public, Dr Howells is particularly relevant for us today because, among the many other things he has done, between 2005 and 2008 he was a Foreign Office Minister.

May I start with an obvious question? What lessons should we learn about decision making from our experience in Helmand?

Dr Howells: Thanks very much, and thanks for inviting me. It is 10 years ago now, of course, since the shift of our troops from Mazar-e-Sharif, basically, down to Helmand and Lashkar Gar occurred. I remember it pretty vividly, but not entirely. I could not remember if you were down there then—I think you were in Iraq—so that is how vague it is, but I remember some things quite vividly.

When I visited Mazar-e-Sharif very early after the May 2005 general election, things were pretty quiet, which surprised me, because it had been the scene of a pretty vicious battle and some terrible aftermaths. Thousands of people had been massacred there, but Mazar seemed a very peaceful sort of place by then. Decisions had already been taken for the shift, just before I went to the Foreign Office. There is a French word, which I cannot remember how to pronounce or spell, but is something like “roulement”. Generals kept using that expression to me, and it was about a shift of forces.

I was told that we were going to Helmand. I asked why, but no one seemed to know. The usual answer was that the Canadians had got Kandahar first. It seemed a bit haphazard

really. I had already been disturbed by the fact that it seemed to me that the chain of command was very tangled anyway. From what we were picking up in the Foreign Office, there seemed to be an ISAF force and an American force, but because there were already Americans down in Helmand province, in Lashkar Gar, the Americans would retain some oversight down there, as well as ISAF having a say.

It was not easy to get answers to such questions. I started to become a bit paranoid about this, so I went back to Afghanistan and managed—as you did, if I remember—to blag my way down to Lashkar Gar via Kandahar. I managed to get a lift on an ex-Soviet helicopter. When I got to Lashkar Gar, there was a fort there that was like something out of “Beau Geste”. There were some units down there, I think of the Air Assault Brigade—a relatively small group of our people—but the fort was held, and that is the word, by about 130 American marines under the command of Colonel Hogberg, who had been sending very interesting dispatches that we had sight of in the Foreign Office. I cannot remember how we had sight of them, but we did, and I wanted to meet him.

When we landed—this is the bit that I remember very vividly—I got out of the helicopter, Colonel Hogberg was there and I said, “Colonel Hogberg, it’s a real privilege to meet you. What’s it like here?” He said, “Well, sir, it ain’t the end of the earth, but you can see it from here.” He then introduced me to two Americans, who were agricultural experts, but clearly CIA people, and between them I come away with one memory of Colonel Hogberg’s words, which were, “When you guys come down here, make sure you bring the best fitter you have in the British Army, because you don’t want to break down outside this camp.”

Colonel Hogberg told me, “We don’t hang around when we’re out on patrol”, but that when they were on patrol, once or sometimes twice a week, “We never know who’s shooting at us.” He said that sometimes you could stumble into a war over water rights, which had been going on for 100 or 200 years, or sometimes into a well-armed convoy of drug smugglers, who might even have anti-aircraft missiles on board. Sometimes it was a village that simply did not like outsiders, or it could be the Taliban.

After that visit, when I got back to London, John Reid, who was then the Defence Secretary, was trying to gather together, in what seemed to me to be—I do not know how to express it—a first-time way, other Departments to share intelligence. I remember that I sat down and wrote out seven or eight questions, and put a very pompous heading on the top, about why we should or should not go to Helmand. They were simple questions but they seemed the natural questions to ask. For example, Helmand was four times the size of Northern Ireland and had 1.4 million people. Northern Ireland has 1.7 million people. We were proposing to send 3,300 troops to Helmand. At the height of the troubles, we had 21,000 troops in Northern Ireland, and we spoke the language. But I am afraid that nobody seemed interested in those questions. I know that technology had moved on a bit, but we were trying to cover those vast areas.

We knew that Helmand was much more dangerous than Mazar-e-Sharif. It has a 550-mile border—no, that is too big. It has about a 250-mile border with Balochistan, the western province of Pakistan, which is one of the wildest places on earth. I tried to blag my way down to the Chagai mountains, because I have always been a mountaineer and I wanted to go down and have a look at them, but Colonel Hogberg told me, “We can’t take you down there because we can’t medevac you out, and there are only bad guys down there.” It

seemed to me that we were about to send all these troops down there yet we were very sanguine, easy and relaxed about the task that they would face, when everything that Colonel Hogberg had said seemed to be the antithesis of that.

Q77 Chair: If I am hearing you right, you had serious concerns and were sceptical about whether it was going to work. Presumably, in the end you feel that a lot of your concerns were vindicated. Thinking back on it, from those pre-concerns to what happened at the end, how did you fail to influence the system, and what did it feel like for you as a Minister? You had these concerns and were obviously worried about going in, so why it is that you were not able to change people's minds? Presumably you were one of the only people around the table who had actually got on a helicopter to Lashkar, and most of the other people presumably did not have a strong feeling of what this place Helmand was. Given that you were the person in the room with a little bit more up-to-date information and a little bit more focus, why were you not winning that debate? How was that debate going?

Dr Howells: Well, for a kick-off, I was a mere Minister of State, and I think these decisions had been taken at very high levels. The other day I was reading a review of a book by Major General Christopher Elliot, who said that he had come to the conclusion that many of the important decisions had been made between the Prime Minister and the Chief of Staff, and nobody else. There was a lot of talk at the time that the Foreign Office, for example, had very little influence over foreign policy—that it was being decided in No. 10—and there is probably quite a lot of truth in that. Christopher Elliot's description of what was going on at the time in the Ministry of Defence sounds horrifying. He describes it as a kind of trading pit, where movements of troops were being decided on the lines of, "Well, I'll support you if you support me." I do not think, despite all of the rhetoric, that very much intelligence was being passed back and forth between Departments, or even sometimes within Departments. Remember, the Afghan war was not the only war; the Iraq war was going on at the same time.

Q78 Chair: If the decision was effectively made by No. 10, how was that decision made? How were they getting the kind of on-the-ground, detailed information to decide whether it was a sensible decision to go into Helmand? What were the formal processes of people going through the advantages, disadvantages, costs and risks?

Dr Howells: There were endless meetings, there is no question about that. The Prime Minister, for example, would attend only the most important of those meetings. I remember that the preoccupation in 2005, before the troops went down in the spring of 2006, was very much Iraq. That was perceived to be generating the biggest problems—the biggest political problems and the biggest military problems. We were in some difficulty in Basra. As I said right at the start, most of our troops were in Mazar-e-Sharif, where there were not great difficulties at the time. To a great extent, Afghanistan was left up to the military.

Q79 Chair: Finally, before I hand over to colleagues, did you feel that your civil servants—your policy machine—were giving you a detailed and rich picture of Helmand?

Dr Howells: No. Foreign Office officials are fine, intelligent people, and they did a superb job, but like the Government, they were very much focused on Iraq rather than Afghanistan. The intelligence that was coming through to the Foreign Office from Afghanistan—not from Helmand, which was even worse—was badly flawed. During the

time I chaired the Intelligence and Security Committee, we visited GCHQ in Cheltenham, and I raised the subject. I could see hackles rising all over the place. I do not think we were getting high-quality intelligence back from Afghanistan and certainly not from Helmand province.

Q80 Dr Lewis: Ministers keep stressing that they should not interfere in military operational decisions, but I am sure you would agree, Dr Howells, that there ought to be some ministerial involvement when it comes to such a major development of policy as going into Helmand province. Was it your impression from your position in the ministerial hierarchy that Ministers were involved? Both Lord Reid and Lord Browne, who took over from him, have told the Committee that they were not involved in issuing the order to go into northern Helmand.

Dr Howells: They are almost certainly speaking the truth. I do not know how much John Reid would have known about the decision that had been taken previously to go into Helmand as part of that strange operation that I mentioned of roulement. I do not know what he knew about the actual process of taking that decision. Somebody knows about it, obviously. To come to the heart of your question, Dr Lewis, it seemed to me as though we had got it the wrong way round. Ministers and politics should be in charge. Military action, like any other action, such as diplomatic action, should follow as a consequence of decisions taken in this place, and not the other way round. A movement with profound implications, such as the movement of many troops and much equipment to Helmand province, is an important political decision, yet I got no sense of that at the time.

Q81 Dr Lewis: When you became a Minister, were you ever briefed on the relationship between Ministers and the military? Des Browne told the Committee at a previous hearing, “I was never briefed that I was part of the chain of command, and I never considered myself to be part of the chain of command, but of course as Secretary of State for Defence, I realised what my responsibilities were.” Is there any coherent system for marrying the input of Ministers, of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and of military chiefs?

Dr Howells: No, I didn’t experience any. I certainly did not receive a briefing, nor did I ever sense that there was a coherent approach to these things. The idea that you would sit down with a major general or anyone else and say, “Now major general, explain to me why we are doing this”, or, “How was this decision taken?”—that certainly did not occur in my experience.

Q82 Dr Lewis: So you do not think that there is an identifiable forum where that sort of confrontation of ideas could take place and be thrashed out.

Dr Howells: Before I retired from Parliament, the new National Security Council came into being and I hoped that that would be a forum.

Q83 Dr Lewis: So would it be your view that on a decision such as a major reorientation of the campaign in Afghanistan, Ministers should have been consulted? In a way, did the elements of the machine that wanted to make this change take advantage of the fact that there was some gap in political leadership, possibly resulting from the change of Secretaries of State at that very moment?

Dr Howells: I am not sure that they depended on the change of Secretaries of State, but you have described what happens quite concisely and accurately. When I wrote out my questions on a bit of paper that I wanted to give to John Reid, word got through to the Afghan desk and they demanded a meeting immediately with their Minister. They were very angry that the Minister was now asking questions about a decision that had already been taken. The decision had already been taken to go down into Helmand and they wanted to know what the hell I was doing asking the Secretary of State for Defence to look at these questions. It had all been dealt with.

Q84 Dr Lewis: And finally, who do you think had taken that decision?

Dr Howells: I sense—

Dr Lewis: Who had dealt with it, to use your terms?

Dr Howells: I think it would be a combination of the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary, and the generals at the time, but that must have been in 2004. The short answer is: I don't know and I find that a bit offensive, really.

Q85 Derek Twigg: Just for the record, you mentioned that there were endless meetings, so can we get to the bottom of what the process was? Were Foreign Office views fed into the process? What were the formal structures that you were aware of? Whether they worked or not, were Foreign Office views put into the planning and policy process for Helmand, for example? What was the actual process?

Dr Howells: The most important element was the fact that we had an ambassador in Kabul, which was Rosalind Marsden at that time. She would send very regular reports, as would our people in MI6 at the station. They would send in reports and we would try to feed those into discussions. For example, we had discussions with the Secretary of State every week; at that time it was Jack Straw, then Margaret Beckett, and then David Miliband. They were usually weekly meetings and that intelligence would be discussed alongside many other subjects. Because that important decision to move down to Helmand had already been taken, it was kind of a given. I always felt that by raising my questions, I was nit-picking rather than being part of some great process of decision making in the Foreign Office.

There would sometimes be interdepartmental meetings. Some of those were chaired by the Prime Minister, but they usually occurred because of or out of fear of a crisis. The day-to-day running of the operations was left to the military. I remember meetings where you would occasionally raise issues like, for example, one of the great problems, which was how we tried to help to rebuild the economy in Afghanistan. Remember, it wasn't just the Foreign Office or the MOD. It was also Development. They were always complaining that their people could not get on with their work because the Taliban had learned very early on that all you had to do was throw a grenade somewhere one night, and there was lockdown. That always disappointed the Afghans themselves. Work was very slow, and it was always being interrupted. I remember that we had meetings about how we could address a problem like that, at which the three Departments would be represented, plus the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. The Treasury, of course, was always there because everything cost money. But I do not remember that process being the kind of process that achieves things in the end.

Q86 Derek Twigg: So there were opportunities to meet with other Departments, discuss things and raise problems and possible solutions, but you felt that it got to a certain level and then that was the end and you never achieved anything?

Dr Howells: Yes, exactly. There were very few occasions, if any, that I can remember where there were a series of meetings and something was achieved at the end of it.

Q87 Derek Twigg: Can I come on to—you partly covered this in your opening remarks to the Chair—the relationship and advice between Ministers, civil servants and the military? You made a comment a number of times that the military were left to just get on with it. You raised the fact that you had to “blag your way” down to Helmand. Could you just explain why you had to blag your way? Were you denied an opportunity to go down there via the official process?

Certainly, one thing that I felt when I was a Minister was that when you went to Helmand, you were either directed to Lashkar Gah or Bastion—so-called safer places. When you tried to get out, there was always some excuse, but when you talked to the military, they said, “Oh yes, we could have facilitated that.” I wonder what your experience was. The point I am coming to is whether it is very important, in your view, that Ministers get out there to the front line as soon as possible and possibly before decisions are made to actually help the planning and policy process.

Dr Howells: It wasn’t any great shakes. Once I had asked Rosalind Marsden to get me down there, she pulled a few strings. There was always a shortage of helicopters, for example, and I agreed to go with some Afghan special forces. That is how I got down there; it was no big deal. Mr Stewart walked there, I think—didn’t you?

Q88 Chair: It is quite striking that, even if you did not feel that it was a difficult time, it later became much more difficult for Ministers to get down there.

Dr Howells: Much more difficult.

Q89 Chair: In fact, I suspect that if you were now to say, “I’m just going to jump on a helicopter with a bunch of Afghan special forces,” someone would say, “No. You’re not doing that.”

Dr Howells: Oh, no. It’s absolutely true. I walked around Lashkar Gah. I met Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, who we were in the process of deposing and of getting Karzai to sack. I had a very interesting discussion with him in Lashkar Gah, where he told me that he was being accused of being a drug smuggler and all the rest of it, but that there were lots of Mohammeds in Helmand and they were badly mistaken. It wasn’t difficult to get there. Lashkar Gah had been built in the late ’50s by the Americans. It was laid out to look like a mid-western American town.

Q90 Derek Twigg: Were you encouraged to go there as part of the process?

Dr Howells: No, I was certainly not encouraged to go, but the military were helpful.

Q91 Derek Twigg: Yes, the military are helpful but actually getting through the Whitehall process is more difficult—that is what I am trying to get at.

Dr Howells: I didn’t ask anyone in Whitehall. That would have been fatal.

Q92 Derek Twigg: Right. Okay, that's fine. Sir Sherard also said that he believed Ministers and civilian officials were being looked at to challenge or overrule military advice and that this was an unbalanced policy process. What is your view on that?

Dr Howells: I don't think there was any encouragement. There was no discussion about—to use that awful phrase—the interface between politics and military action. As I said to Dr Lewis, I think that one should have followed the other. A democracy should take military action only after its politicians have decided legally that it is the thing to do. The problem is that once the war had kicked off, then politicians were not encouraged to get involved. That is a short answer.

Q93 Derek Twigg: I think the key point was the reluctance to challenge military advice.

Dr Howells: Yes, all politicians are reluctant to challenge.

Q94 Derek Twigg: Why do you think that is?

Dr Howells: I think because you get out there and these guys are up to their necks in blood and guts. You have arrived there and you are going to be treated very well. You are going to go home and be safe, for example in Pontypridd, or wherever you happen to be. Those people have to stay out there and fight and you assume that they know better than you do what is possible and what is not possible.

That comes back to the point I made to Mr Stewart initially, which is that it is not always true. I only discovered this in 2008. By that time I was very, very jaundiced about the whole Afghan operation and made a speech in which I said that we should withdraw our troops immediately, because there was no point in them dying for a corrupt regime that wasn't going to change. But that was regarded as a political gesture; it wasn't taken seriously as a piece of military advice as well.

Q95 Derek Twigg: But what I am trying to establish is whether, from the experience you had, you believe there were times when we should have challenged military advice more robustly.

Dr Howells: Yes, I believe military advice should have been challenged time and again. And by the way, one of the other mysteries that I do not understand is why those bad decisions were made in the first place. We had plenty of experience and contemporary history to look at. Not least, I mentioned the fact that we were reported to have sent 3,300 men down to Helmand province. The Russians had 100,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan and had been driven out. One wonders how that military decision was made.

Q96 Derek Twigg: Yes. Finally, did you ever sense that the UK military or part of the military were pursuing a separate agenda and either pressurising Ministers or keeping them in the dark, for whatever reason?

Dr Howells: No, I never came across any secrets.

Q97 Derek Twigg: Not a separate agenda that the military had, or anything?

Dr Howells: You can never tell about Departments, as you well know, Mr Twigg. People are always worried about guarding their funds and their money and their futures. It may

well be that there were reports that emphasised the need for more tanks or helicopters or whatever it was.

Q98 Derek Twigg: That's actually the point. Isn't the view that the military obviously wanted to be in an operation therefore we had the stories about equipment and all that? Do you think there was deliberate leaking going on to the press from elements of the military?

Dr Howells: Yes, definitely. I can't think of a time in history when that didn't happen, frankly. I know that there was great bitterness in Basra and Baghdad about the fact that there seemed to be a new interest in Afghanistan and in the move to Helmand, when the situation was still very critical in Iraq. I think the military were very upset about that.

Q99 Mrs Moon: There is a certain cynicism that develops in Committee visits. Whenever you meet the latest people on the ground they always tell you that the last lot got it totally wrong and their plan was rubbish, but now they have it right and we are on the right way forward. Was that your experience, and how did that influence the decision making in Westminster? When you hear that every time you make a visit, you being to wonder how short term the decision making is, given that it seems to change at least every six months, when there is a rotation. Did that influence some of the political decision making?

Dr Howells: No, I really did not come across that. Remember, it is impossible to take that decision making out of the wider political context. The events after September 2001 were so extraordinary and with the way that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq developed, the political energy seemed to roll on. The impression I had was that there had not been a settled time when this general might have made that decision and it had been judged whether it had been the right one and that we had learned from it.

I think people were learning constantly out there. I never had the impression that they looked back and thought that terrible mistakes had been made, which clearly they had been. Terrible mistakes had been made. I remember a very distinguished and clever general explaining to me on a big sheet of paper how they would have an ink blot approach to Helmand province. They would have an ink blot here and an ink blot there and they would gradually join them up and then control the whole area. It was completely bonkers. It was like platoon houses.

Which general or colonel came to that idea? I know partly how they came to it. It was because the Afghans were demanding that our troops went up into the north of Helmand to sort out Sangin and the other towns and villages up there that had been taken over by the Taliban. I don't think people were blaming their predecessors. They were constantly having to learn and adapt to the demands placed on them. Remember, there were only 3,300 of them in 2006.

Q100 Mrs Moon: Looking back at the decision-making process you were involved in, what would be the key change that in retrospect you would like to have seen in the process for making decisions on what the next step was to be?

Dr Howells: It would certainly have been a much bigger group responsible for making those decisions. I suspect that a lot of those decisions were made at the very top by very few people. That was the thing that frustrated me most. You could never tell quite what the relationship was between the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister and between

the Prime Minister and the heads of the chiefs of staff and the Defence Secretary. Trying to understand the balance of power between those people is very difficult. Once a war has started, as Mr Twigg's question implied, there is always a tendency to say, "Let the generals get on with it, that they know what is best." Within the MOD, I always had the impression that the last thing they needed was interfering politicians.

Q101 Richard Benyon: Have I got this right? You are saying that the Foreign Office and the MOD at that time were running hot, running down one war and running up another. Did you get any impression that there were procedures that were exercised on occasions in Government on how a deployment would take place and how different Departments would work, and that there would be co-ordination? Or was that not apparent because it was so current and hot?

Dr Howells: It wasn't very apparent to me, but I was not operating at that level. That is something else that is quite interesting. Even though I had responsibility for Afghanistan, I felt that decisions had already been made—the very important decisions—and the idea that I could suddenly interfere and, because I had been down to Helmand province on a helicopter trip, tell a general that there were, in fact, going to be big problems down there, seemed like hubris, to say the least, for a Minister of State.

Q102 Richard Benyon: Are you saying to us that the best piece of intelligence that you, as the Minister responsible for Afghanistan, got was from that conversation with the American colonel and that whoever was making these decisions higher up probably did not have access to the information that no one knew who they were being shot at by or that there were deep cultural issues—sometimes on a village-by-village basis, sometimes larger and wider—as well as the other dynamics of drugs and local enmities? Would you say that those cultural issues were not being fed into the decision-making process in the way that they should have been?

Dr Howells: I don't know if they weren't being fed in, but they certainly did not figure as being very important. Part of it is the thing that we are most proud of about the British Army and the British armed forces—this thing they throw up constantly—which is their "can do" mentality, where they say, "It doesn't matter what it is. We can sort it." I don't think it is as extreme as the Americans were—certainly at that time—although I think the Americans learned faster than we did. The Americans believed they had such technology, such firepower and such resources that they thought, "All this stuff about losing the war in the 1840s—that's history; it's meaningless. We'll sort this lot out." That is very important. Our intelligence was badly flawed before we went down to Helmand—there is no question about it—but where that intelligence came from or where it was ignored is still a bit of a mystery to me, I have to say.

Q103 Richard Benyon: Is there a shopping list of things that, based on your experience, you would now like to happen in terms of better, more inclusive and more accountable decision making across Whitehall if we were to find ourselves in a similar position?

Dr Howells: The most important thing is that Parliament should run foreign policy and, ultimately, make big military decisions. I think the generals agree with that, by the way. I think that, because of cutbacks over the decades, they are very wary about getting involved in new wars, especially remote, distant, big wars. I think they would like to see a

complete transformation of the way in which Parliament and defence treat each other and how decisions are made. That is the first thing; that is by far the most important thing.

Secondly, Parliament should mount an immediate assault on what the Americans call stovepiping—that holding of intelligence and decision making has to go. It was a terrible shock to us in July 2005, when 52 people were murdered in London by Islamic extremists, that some police forces were not talking to other police forces, and that some of the security agencies were not talking to other people and so on. Stovepiping has to go completely. You cannot discuss things everywhere across Whitehall transparently, because some things have to remain secret, but they should not remain secret between Departments and between Ministers; there should be much more openness and a more creative exchange of intelligence and ideas.

By the way, let me just add that the Foreign Office is an amazing asset. I worked in six different Departments, and they all have their strengths and their weaknesses, but the Foreign Office has ambassadors and it has people on the ground, and it has a very good relationship with MI6. I really believe we don't use it enough in gathering intelligence and co-ordinating the gathering of intelligence. That is key to it, especially now, where I sense that we are moving back into a kind of fortress Britain. I think our posts abroad have to be treated as much more important assets, much more valuable assets, than they are at the moment.

Q104 Moon: I want to ask you a little bit about other constraints; not the constraints of being a Minister in Westminster, but the constraints of being a Minister in an alliance with the US. So how much was the alliance, and the need to discuss with the US, influencing and constraining your capacity as a Minister?

Dr Howells: Well, it did not constrain—I was not important enough to be constrained by anybody, really. But the Americans—I heard it myself and understood it very clearly—were always very impatient with us. They were impatient with us over the way we conducted our military affairs in Basra, and they were impatient with us about the way we went into Helmand province and the kinds of things that we did there. They did not believe that we had put enough resources down there, either into Basra or into Helmand, and after a while that impatience grew very acute and they decided to take action, of course, because the ISAF commanders, apart from the eight months or so that David Richards did, were American; and in the end they sent whatever it was, 11,000 American troops, into Helmand to supplement the 8,000 or so British troops who were there already, and we drew into a much smaller area of responsibility when the Americans took over. So the Americans were always a big factor in this; but not necessarily with regard to the Foreign Office.

At Secretary of State level I would have thought that Jack Straw, Margaret Beckett and David Miliband would have been talking to their counterparts in America pretty frequently; and no doubt some of that military stuff would have percolated through.

Q105 Mrs Moon: Was the frustration about the decision-making process or the actual decisions that came out of the process?

Dr Howells: I sensed that it was about military decisions that were being made—about tactics.

Q106 Mrs Moon: Was it that those military decisions were not the ones that they wanted, or that the decisions were taking so long to be reached?

Dr Howells: No, I never heard that they were about time; but they were certainly about effectiveness, as the Americans saw it. Our commanders saw the decisions that they made and the effect of the troops on the ground in a different way; but there were differences.

Q107 Mrs Moon: You talked about stovepiping. How much is there stovepiping between Departments—so that the Foreign Office only talks to State, and the Department of Defence and the MOD talk to each other, but there is no cross-departmental discussion; and how much does that colour the decisions and the orientation that was coming out of the Westminster Departments?

Dr Howells: As I said, Mrs Moon, there were lots of meetings, and there were cross-departmental meetings. Whether those meetings actually influenced what each Department did is another matter. That is the difficult bit, I think. I sensed, always, that the MOD was conducting a war, which it was running. That is what happens. The generals and the wing commanders, and so on—they run operations; and the problems that the Foreign Office or Development might have with the way in which military affairs were being conducted would be looked at, no doubt, and sometimes would be treated seriously—but I did not sense that they had a profound effect on the way in which the war was conducted in Afghanistan.

Q108 Mrs Moon: Then were those generals and air marshals holding discussions with their military counterparts, and were they influencing the decisions? I am just intrigued as to how much the maintaining of that alliance and pressure within that alliance was influencing decision making.

Dr Howells: I cannot answer that, because I was not in the MOD. I never served in the MOD, but I heard plenty of griping, lots of griping, from commanders on the ground who were involved in day-to-day battles and operations, and trying to get the right assets and so on, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, about the way decisions were being made and priorities arrived at, at the MOD in Whitehall; but I suspect that that kind of griping has never been absent in any war.

Q109 Mrs Moon: As a Minister of State, how much engagement and involvement did you have with your counterpart?

Dr Howells: Very little. With John Reid, quite a lot, because I had known him for a long time. He was a friend of mine.

Q110 Moon: But with your American counterpart?

Dr Howells: Funnily enough, I would meet them at least as many times as I would meet my British counterparts because I would be out in Iraq, Afghanistan or Yemen or some other lovely spot, Pakistan, and they would often be there. The conversations with them were not as interesting as the conversations with American intelligence who would be out there. They were much more interesting conversations.

Q111 Mrs Moon: Which had the greatest influence in what you fed back into the decision-making process here?

Dr Howells: I doubt if anything that I fed back had a profound influence on anybody. I say that with some bitterness and grinding my teeth.

Mrs Moon: It sounds like it. Thank you.

Q112 Ms Stuart: Apologies for being late. The accusation of the Blair Government was that because there was a deal between Gordon Brown and Tony Blair that said, “You do home and I do abroad”, No. 10 took over both MOD and the Foreign Office much more so than any previous Prime Minister had. Would that be an accurate description?

Dr Howells: I hadn’t heard that arrangement. That is a new one to me. You know better than me, I’m sure.

Q113 Ms Stuart: The point is whether No. 10 had a greater— You were talking about counterparts who you listened to.

Dr Howells: No. 10 ran foreign policy, no question about it. In the balance of power in Whitehall, No. 10 in those days was easily the most powerful player.

Q114 Chair: Dr Howells, you have reflected on a huge number of different sorts of complexities and you keep coming back to the word “intelligence”. The two sorts of information you seem to be talking about are, first, cultural and political information, specifically about a place like Helmand and perhaps Afghanistan more broadly and understanding that place, and, secondly, information on this big complex picture of coalition operations including US decision making, American generals, American intelligence officers and American State Department officials. What you seem to be arguing is that the problem for the British Government—for you as a Minister and even for No. 10—was having that depth of accurate information either about Helmand or the bigger context of the campaign. Is it realistic to expect British officials to have that degree of information, given that they were often on six-month or 12-month tours, they could barely leave their bases because of security considerations, they didn’t speak local languages and there were very few of them? Is it realistic, or had Britain just simply overreached itself and put itself into a game that it could not really play and that it never really had the resources to meet?

Dr Howells: Well, Mr Stewart, that is the question about Afghanistan that you have to arrive at the truth about because when the decision was taken to move our troops into Helmand, that intelligence should have been there. I can’t see a reason why it wasn’t. Remember, there was very little fighting in Helmand. Helmand was run by gangsters, like most of Afghanistan, and there was no reason why we shouldn’t have known what it was like on the ground or why we shouldn’t have spoken to people like Colonel Hogue. Never mind about speaking to him: I was reading his dispatches before I met him, so why wasn’t Government doing that? This is what I don’t understand. I suspect it is because those big decisions about wars and global policy are taken not on the basis of that kind of detailed information but because there are different priorities. There are lots of things that I was very frustrated about, Pakistan being one of them. It always seemed to me that that was by far the greater danger to this country. Remember, we went out there saying that we were sending our troops there because it is better to fight al-Qaeda on the plains and mountains of Afghanistan than it is to fight them on the streets of London, Birmingham and Cardiff. It took me only a very short time to realise that by far the greater danger was Pakistan. Discussions on what was going on in Pakistan—as a refuge for the Taliban in

Afghanistan where plots and training were taking place—with its huge links with this country, never surfaced because they were felt to be politically too sensitive. We could not talk about those things—the thinking was: keep them quiet.

I do not think that there is an excuse for not having intelligence. We have got a superb organisation in the Secret Intelligence Service and MI5, which is tremendous, and we have got one of the world's most sophisticated listening stations in GCHQ, so we should have that intelligence. What worries me is that we may have had that intelligence and still made the decision to go down the way that we did.

Q115 Mrs Moon: Dr Howells, you have said a couple of times that the decisions ought to be made in Parliament, by the politicians, and that ownership of those decisions should be back here. There has been considerable criticism of the decision making in relation to Syria where twice MPs were called back from recess having had no access to papers or the intelligence briefings that you talked about having seen before you met the general. They had had no access even to their own researchers to dig out information.

Parliament is asked to make critical decisions usually on the basis of Whips' reports. How, then, do you feel that Parliament can ensure that the decision-making process is politically based and robust in the way in which you seem to imply that we need to go owing to your experience as a Minister? What critical decision-making changes need to be made so that Parliament is informed and can make the right decisions?

Dr Howells: It seems to me that there are two situations where Parliament will be called upon to do these things in the future. One is where suddenly a situation has arisen which is critical. The idea that you should wait for Parliament to sit and for everyone to digest what intelligence is available perhaps will not work on those occasions—Parliament will have to decide on that. But the idea that Parliament did not really have a say—it certainly did not—in moving troops from one war, Mazar-e-Sharif, down to a new war in Helmand, there is no excuse for that. That is a decision that politicians have got to make. That cannot be left up to generals, because you are going to a completely different zone of operations and facing, by that time, a completely new enemy. That decision was made by the MOD, not by Parliament.

At the time I certainly would not have felt like that, because I did not know about it. It was only after I had been there, talked to lots of people and kept going back there that I began to understand just how big this problem was. But I certainly think that Parliament must ensure that, whether it is your Committee or whatever, there is at least a group of MPs who have the contemporary intelligence required to make these decisions—there is no question about it.

It is not mission impossible. It would not take a huge amount of organising so that Parliament could have those debates and be very well informed about the actual situation, not some broad, noble dream that people have about turning Afghanistan into Surrey.

Q116 Ms Stuart: There is a continued tension between the subject specialists and the political decision making. We have seen that quite often someone who is a really good subject specialist as a politician actually makes a pretty inadequate Secretary of State in that subject, because they have forgotten that they are there to be a politician, not a subject

specialist. This is a continual tension. If someone is a political decision maker, they are then faced with a difficulty.

Assume that you are the Prime Minister who, for reasons which have very little to do with Helmand, decides that we are going into Helmand to show that we are tough guys. Things we might have done in the past haven't quite worked, but we are still up to whatever it takes. You are then presented with facts, and you have two choices. You either use the facts in order to change your mind, or you use the facts as yet another thing you have to deal with. That is the tension I want you to think about a little bit. What does the politician require? I suggest that politicians probably require very robust generals and a very robust civil service. These allow politicians to look very rigorously at a piece of evidence and decide whether that evidence is strong enough to make them change their mind, or whether it is simply something they have to deal with. Do you think we have the structures in our system to allow that to happen?

Dr Howells: I think we have the structures and the assets. The political will is something very different. I have no doubt that at the Foreign Office—I do not know the MOD, so I can't talk about that—the intelligence that should go into those decisions can be gathered and presented as well as anybody can do it. What happens next, when Ministers get hold of this stuff, is a different matter. What I do not understand is how decisions can be made which seem to owe much more to pledges made as a consequence of being members of alliances—whether with the Americans or with NATO or the EU or whoever—which then seem to override the importance of that intelligence.

I can't remember the exact figures—Mr Stewart probably has them—but by about 2008, we had lost about 100 of our armed forces in Afghanistan and we then started to lose them at a much greater rate. Whenever I started asking questions about what the hell we were doing and why we were supporting this corrupt regime in Afghanistan, the answer was, “Well, you know, you can't pull out now”. I remember one of our most distinguished ambassadors saying that this would take 30 years. I said to him, “Hang on a minute, you don't have to go back to your constituency, to Pontypridd, and tell those people that you have to fight for the next 30 years, and the sons and daughters who are going to go out there have a good chance of being killed over the next 30 years in order to make sure that this corrupt regime turns into something decent”.

Those political decisions have been made by somebody, and they were made for reasons which are not—in my view, anyway—based on intelligence. They are based on much larger political priorities, as was hinted at in the question. The country now has to decide what it is going to do. Britain is at a real turning point. It has to decide whether it wishes to continue being some sort of global player, in which case it has to sort out how many people it is prepared to sacrifice and what treasure and blood it is going to expend on these expeditions. Or is it is going to become a kind of souped-up Sweden, or something like that? Those are big political decisions to make, but they are political decisions and not military ones.

Chair: Dr Howells, I keep saying that the next question will be the last, but colleagues are clearly very excited and keen to come in. This is the final question.

Q117 Dr Julian Lewis: Did you at any time become aware of serious discussions taking place as to the wisdom of this whole attempt at nation building, rather than just containing and countering potential terrorism?

Dr Howells: Yes, very early on. The first time I ever went to meet President Karzai, in 2005, it was quite clear to anybody who looked around them and was interested in landscapes and urban-scapes. It was quite obvious. First, you went through the outer security perimeter, which was Afghan. Then you went through a kind of circle, which was American and very tough-looking. Then you went into a final area, which I subsequently found out was run by very, very skilled subcontractors—private operatives—who guarded the building itself and operated the machines that made sure that what happened to Massoud was not going to happen to Karzai: he wasn't going to be blown to bits by suicide bombers carrying explosives in a television camera. Anybody would realise as a consequence of that experience, and of subsequently doing the same thing, that he ran nothing outside of that circle. He was depending on appointed warlords all over Afghanistan: men who were intensely corrupt, and whose corruption and violence had been the reason why the Taliban came to power in the first place. It was unbelievable, really, and all Ministers and Foreign Secretaries denied that it was the case. They said, "No, no, Afghanistan isn't as corrupt as that. These people aren't as self-serving and as murderous as that. There are good people there." Of course there were good people there, but the people who ran Afghanistan were profoundly corrupt, and it worried me that we were sending fine men and women to prop up that regime.

Chair: Dr Howells, thank you very much indeed for your time.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Pauline Hayes**, former Head of Office in Afghanistan 2010-12, Department for International Development, gave evidence.

Q118 Chair: Thank you very much for coming. It would be very useful to the Committee to get a sense of where you think you can tie in most usefully to helping us understand how decision making operated in Afghanistan and what we could do to improve decision making in the future, bearing it in mind that you were not in Afghanistan. On the record, the Committee tried to request six times for DFID officials who were actually on the ground at the time, but for some reason DFID sent you. So it would be nice to get a sense of why DFID sent you and what you hope to be able to share with us.

Pauline Hayes: Well, what I bring is that I have been working in Afghanistan and other places, latterly, for four and a half years now, both in-country and at HQ. I think I can bring a perspective to how decisions were being made from 2010 onwards. I can also bring a perspective from the London end, because I have seen it from both ends. I have also seen the NSC in operation for the last four and a half years; obviously, that has changed the way that security decisions are made. So I can bring a perspective to that, I hope.

Q119 Chair: Okay. You have been listening to the testimony we just had from Dr Kim Howells. What did you conclude on the basis of that, as an official listening to that from a different point of view? What surprised you, what didn't surprise you, what would you agree with, what would you disagree with in terms of what you have heard over the last hour?

Pauline Hayes: I think I was struck by just how far we have moved since 2004-05, which you mainly focused on. We have moved an awfully long way in terms of decision making and of accountabilities for those decisions as well. In terms of relationships between different Government Departments, too, we have moved a long way. I have noticed that myself, not just from my experience in Afghanistan but previously. I think you have seen from my CV that I worked in Iraq, and so on. So I have watched an evolution in those relationships and how we handle this kind of work and this kind of agenda.

Q120 Chair: So what has changed? What did you not recognise in Dr Howells's description that you think would be different today?

Pauline Hayes: I think we would recognise that, in deciding to do X, Y or Z you need to do your analysis, gather it in and make decisions based on hard evidence. A lot of work nowadays goes into making evidence-based decisions. There was intelligence at the time, but it is not just about intelligence; you have to look more broadly than at the intelligence. You have to look at the political economy of wherever it is you are trying to operate; you have to look at socio-economic statistics; you have to look at the whole picture.

Q121 Chair: What Dr Howells suggested is that there was a lot of information out there. The problem is the gap between that information and decisions. In 2005 DFID hosted a series of three-day seminars, gathering all the stuff you are talking about. It was not just the representatives from SIS; there were also DFID people, contractors, consultants and Government experts. Socio-economic data was gathered and a full picture of Helmand was produced. As we have heard from witnesses, the conclusions were pretty gloomy. This whole

package was produced for people in 2005, which essentially said that this was a fragile, traumatised, fractured province and it was going to be difficult for us to make any progress on governance, economic development or security; and yet the decision was still made. The sense that we are getting from evidence is that the decisions are still made because the people making the decisions, even if you provide all that information to them, are not burying their heads in that information; they are thinking about their obligations towards NATO or some grand NATO decision on troop movements or their place within the US alliance or the desire to get out of Iraq.

Pauline Hayes: Yes; but, as an official, you can only present the best evidence-based analysis that you have available. You can advise Ministers, but at the end of the day it is Ministers who will decide things. We provide the best professional advice. Technical, political, whichever Government Department we are in, we provide the best advice we can. But the decisions are made by politicians.

Q122 Chair: Okay. Finally, before I hand on to Malcolm. The whole model that Dr Howells was producing was dependent on this idea—you are using the words too—of hard evidence, of expertise, of people who really, deeply, deeply understand the situation. What is worrying me about that is that it might be an unrealistic model and that actually people do not really, deeply, deeply understand a situation.

Dr Howells used a good analogy that might be worth thinking about, the analogy with Northern Ireland. He was suggesting that the kind of understanding that officials have about Northern Ireland is 1,000 times greater than they could ever possibly have about Afghanistan—they speak the language fluently and there is a large permanent civil service and a large police force on the ground, with the British Government directly in control, not working with an Afghan Government or coalition partners. Whereas in fact, with the best will in the world, officials are small teams of people who generally do not speak the local language fluently, are generally there on short tours and are prevented by understandable security constraints from actually getting out of the compounds and spending much time with Afghans, so it is very, very, very difficult to expect that you can produce this hard evidence.

In practice, presumably, if I had turned up to see you in 2010 or 2011 and said, “It’s a disaster, Pauline”, you would have said, “It’s not so bad.” But really, what do any of us really know about the situation? That conversation has taken place without the depth of knowledge that we would have about a domestic situation, the amount of mileage that we have about Birmingham or Glasgow. We are the blind leading the blind.

Pauline Hayes: Yes, but I or any good official would, I hope, listen to the views of people who do know the stuff on the ground or look at research that has been done. You would try to put together a picture with which to make your best judgment of what direction you think we should go in, whatever the issue, and what advice you should then give to Ministers. But I would not be so arrogant as to have dropped into Kabul in 2010 and thought that I knew it all. I just think that is the wrong way to go. You have to listen to the people on the ground. You are right—we have to listen to the Afghans themselves and to take note. They know the country, they know the language, they know the cultures—

Q123 Chair: How do you listen to them if you do not speak their language, if you are not in their villages, not living with them and have not been there for more than a couple of years?

It is all very well saying that you are listening to Afghans, but listening to Afghans presumably requires a really deep cultural and political understanding, which is—my sense is—not the key training. Your staff are trained specifically in development, in governance and in civil society, but not specifically in Afghanistan.

Pauline Hayes: Yes, but we have Afghans working in our office in Kabul and, originally, in Helmand. We work with Afghans both inside and outside the office. We work with Afghans in the Government, we work with civil society, we work with the private sector—

Q124 Chair: Do you not recognise that you face the challenge—

Pauline Hayes: Of course.

Chair: Do you not recognise that you are presenting a very optimistic model? Listening to you, you seem to be suggesting that it is fine—you have some locally engaged staff, you have some people you employ in the office, you go to see Ministers—but that is not beginning to touch the depth of information knowledge that would have been required to challenge the decision making in Helmand. It is not enough. It is not enough to know that things are going badly wrong. That tends to reinforce optimism.

Pauline Hayes: We are constantly, constantly learning. The longer that we are in Afghanistan, the more we are learning. We do not pretend to have all the answers—we didn't then, we don't now—but what we know is that we need to understand the issues on the ground, the motivations of people, the incentives for change, the behaviours and so on, all the things that you are describing, before we make various interventions if we want them to be successful. We are learning every day, because as you know Afghanistan is a hugely complex country and place. We are learning all the time. We do not always get it right, and we admit when we do not get things right, but we are trying our best to help that country, with the best knowledge and experience that we can gather to help it to be a better place.

Q125 Chair: Okay. I did say I would hand over, but I will just follow up on that. So you are trying your best, but there is language, tour lengths, movement and contact with people. What institutional reforms have been introduced into the civil service to reflect this very peculiar environment? Did people say, “Okay, we accept that we got this wrong in 2005; we didn't know enough about it, so we are going to ensure that the majority of our DFID staff do at least one or two years of training in Dari and Pashto before they are deployed.”? Did anybody say, “We understand that we don't know enough about this, so we're going to run specific six-month courses on Afghan culture and history before people are deployed.”? Did people say, “We recognise we don't know enough about it, so we're going to change the security regulations, change the way things are done, push people out into more remote areas in order to live alongside people.”? What has actually changed in the HR/personnel-management structures in London in order to learn the lessons of our failures in 2005?

Pauline Hayes: A number of things. We haven't done a deep immersion, as we call it, in the way you describe, but we do a lot of briefing and inducting staff before they go out to postings. They are shorter postings than in a more normal, traditional development environment, but going to Afghanistan is a voluntary posting. They are going to a conflict country without their family, so they are making a big commitment as it is. We can give them the briefing and induction they need, we give them all the support we can ahead of

their going, and when they get there, there are further inductions and so on, but we have to weigh up the pros and cons of investing in two or three years of language training for what could be a 12 or 18-month posting, weigh up the investment and whether that is what we should be doing. I haven't got the stats with me, but we are seeing more people going back to Afghanistan, so we have got an institutional memory building up.

The International Development Committee asked similar questions a couple of years ago. We can demonstrate the ways in which we are building our knowledge and recouping that knowledge by people going back, not just once, but twice and maybe even three times. I would say, as well, that although there is a minimum period for people to go on postings, most people do longer than the minimum period.

Q126 Mrs Moon: Mrs Hayes, you said that the decisions are always made by the politicians. One thing that has become very clear is that the decision to move into northern Helmand was certainly made by a politician, but Brigadier Butler told us that the provincial reconstruction team in Lashkar Gar would have been privy to the discussion around the move into northern Helmand. What is your memory of that decision and the process of making the decision? What was the input of DFID? Are you aware of that?

Pauline Hayes: At the time I think we had one person in what was a very nascent PRT—a tiny PRT, as I understand it—and that person was relatively junior, I should add. So our ability to influence and shape those decisions would, frankly, have been minimal on the ground. People were aware, obviously, at the Kabul end, of various possibilities and decisions being made, and, obviously, at the London end as well, but at the field end that you are describing, I think that very little would have been known about it; just an awareness, really.

Q127 Mrs Moon: What advice and information would either that one person or the Kabul team have been sending back to London? What insight and role did they have in helping the decision-making process to be fully informed?

Pauline Hayes: They would have been aware that decisions were about to be made to go north and so on, and they would have been feeding that back to the centre. Then there would have been the normal structures that were available at the time, decision-making structures both to officials and ministerial. So it would go up the chain, essentially.

Q128 Mrs Moon: What about Brigadier Butler? What opportunity did the PRT have to influence Brigadier Butler's decision-making process?

Pauline Hayes: I can't answer that. I really don't know the answer to that.

Q129 Mrs Moon: It is said that the PRT system is the best model for co-ordinating and implementing policy in conflicts. Would you agree?

Pauline Hayes: I don't think it is the best model. I think it is a model that we should consider. It is interesting to watch the evolution of the PRT. It started as a very small thing and it grew to something much bigger by 2009-10. It learned a lot of lessons along the way, in terms of interactions and so on, and in its last years it had developed into a really useful model. Whether or not it was the best model, it was working reasonably well in Helmand.

Q130 Mrs Moon: How did the model influence the decisions that were made? How did it feed into the decision-making process?

Pauline Hayes: Having a group of people based in a province, with their ears more closely to the ground than they could be in Kabul or London, is obviously good. You get a much better sense of what people's views are, what the issues are, etc. It is important that we remember that it was not just a UK PRT but an international PRT—we had the US, the Danes and the Estonians there—and it was a mixture of military and civilian personnel. I think that mix is good, in terms of getting better co-ordination and a better sharing of views. It was not perfect in the early years—I would be the first to admit that, given what I heard about it—but we learned the lessons very quickly, and it was establishing itself as a good model. I was sat in Kabul, but I obviously visited Helmand regularly, and I would hear about other PRTs—some that were working well and some that weren't. The view was that Helmand was one of the better ones, but we shouldn't forget that there were other good ones as well.

Q131 Mrs Moon: Did you feel that part of your work was to feed back intelligence information that would influence decision making in Westminster?

Pauline Hayes: There were intelligence people on the ground in Helmand who were feeding intelligence back to Westminster.

Q132 Mrs Moon: No, I mean from the PRTs. As you said, they were the people on the ground interacting with the local Afghans, taking in information and understanding what their wishes and needs were. How much of that did you see as valuable intelligence to feed back into Westminster to form part of the decision-making process?

Pauline Hayes: Obviously, we heard and saw useful information or intelligence—whatever you want to call it—which we would feed back to try to inform decision making. I should add that Helmand would join London meetings by video conference, and so on, and the head of the PRT would join in those discussions. It wasn't a case of feeding it back on a piece of paper or third hand. They were directly engaged.

Q133 Mrs Moon: On a scale of one to 10, with one as absolutely useless and 10 as absolutely spot-on brilliant, where would you say the British PRT concept sits?

Pauline Hayes: I would say seven and a half. I would not say that it was perfect, but in the time that I watched it evolving and being wound down I could see it becoming a better vehicle for what we were trying to do down there. I was struck by the ways in which the civilians and the military—certainly from 2009-10 onwards—were working together much more effectively. I can give examples, if that would be useful.

Q134 Mrs Moon: What would you need to see changed to improve the way it worked, in terms of influencing the decisions about what needed to happen on the ground?

Pauline Hayes: What makes me a little cautious is that sometimes the ambitions and the time scales were unrealistic. I think we were getting it right towards the end, in terms of monitoring and evaluation work. We were checking whether what we said we would do was having the right effect. As a development person, I am in a long-term game. Whatever I do, stuff takes time. You are trying to change systems and behaviours. I think sometimes we are unrealistic about how long development takes. I think we have to be realistic and

we have to recognise the environment we are working in and tailor our objectives, our timelines, etc., to that.

Q135 Dr Lewis: Following straight on from that, were you ever aware of any serious discussions being held at the highest level by your Department about the wisdom of a long-term nation-building approach in Afghanistan?

Pauline Hayes: No, not in the time that I have been working on Afghanistan. Afghanistan is one of the poorest and most fragile countries in the world, as I am sure you are aware. For DFID to be working in Afghanistan—it goes without saying we would work in a country like that, given our priorities, but we recognise it is a long-term game. We recognise—assuming the Afghans still want us—we could be there for 20, 30 years working on Afghanistan. That is how long it is going to take to develop Afghanistan, and we started from an extremely low base when we first arrived there in 2001-02.

Should we not be engaged in Afghanistan? No, I cannot say I have ever heard that discussion.

Q136 Dr Lewis: So that was taken as a given.

You mentioned the coming of the National Security Council. Can you explain in what way, if at all, that has affected the way in which you get political direction?

Pauline Hayes: Well, I think the NSC is a good model. It is a kind of whole-of-Government approach to looking at national security issues. I think whatever we do is couched in a wider national security strategy. Under that we have the Building Stability Overseas Strategy. I can see a sort of cascade system that I think works much better than the models we had previous to that.

From a DFID perspective, we have a seat on the NSC. Our Minister is there and can take full part in those discussions and try to influence and shape those discussions. I think the fact that the NSC is chaired at the highest political level is good as well.

Q137 Dr Lewis: What we are trying to get at is, at what different level does what different type of political decision get taken that gives you a direction in terms of your operations? Can you give us some examples of decisions that would be taken locally in theatre, as it were; for example, those that would have to go to London and be taken in the Department, those that would have to go higher, where those decisions that go higher would actually be taken, and what sort of decisions those would be?

Pauline Hayes: In terms of DFID's programme—in terms of budgeting decisions—we are obviously given a budget, and then we have a quite simple sort of delegated authority system for how we spend that budget. We devise operational plans that set out how we are going to use that agreed budget. We can determine that operational plan. However, in Afghanistan everything we do is also driven by an NSC strategy for Afghanistan. So DFID's operational plan must obviously fit within that NSC strategy, which it does.

The two things sort of work in parallel, almost. Once the NSC strategy for Afghanistan is determined, we can then shape our operational plan and what we are going to prioritise within that, how we are going to spend money, what policy areas we are going to focus on, and so on. The implementation and delivery of that operational plan is down to the head of

office in Kabul, but obviously under my direction. But then, even for delivering that operational plan—it is over £500 million now—where we are doing projects the Minister will still approve business cases for them. So there is still a heavy degree of ministerial involvement and decision making in what we are doing in Afghanistan.

Going back up to the NSC, when we are reporting back as officials how the NSC strategy is progressing, it has a series of measures of progress, so we have a very clear set of indicators. Obviously, what DFID is doing as a contribution to that feeds back up to the NSC.

Q138 Dr Lewis: If I were to ask you to give me some specific examples of decisions that have been taken in the NSC that have affected what DFID has been doing in Afghanistan, what would you say?

Pauline Hayes: Well, obviously decisions were taken two or three years ago about closing down the PRT in Helmand, and the wider decision was taken in terms of exit because the Afghan Government said that they wanted all PRTs closed. So we agreed an exit plan and strategy and that affected DFID's plans for how it would close down its operations in Helmand and basically move everything back to the centre again. That would be one example.

Q139 Dr Lewis: Thank you. Finally, could you give me an idea of, both before and after the coming of the NSC, your concept of where the ultimate responsibility lay for policy in Afghanistan and where the centre of direction for Departments such as yours was located?

Pauline Hayes: I would say: in the NSC.

Q140 Dr Lewis: And before the NSC?

Pauline Hayes: Before the NSC there were Cabinet committee structures—I am sorry, I have forgotten the acronyms—but they did not operate in the same whole-of-government way that I described for the NSC. So you have all the key Ministries engaged and I think that that in itself brings different perspectives to the strategy.

Q141 Dr Lewis: And you did not feel that, for example, the military were pursuing their own agenda or anything like that.

Pauline Hayes: I have not seen that, no, and I would say that the NSC meets and then there is an NSC operations level, which is permanent secretaries, and a senior officials level. There is a whole cascade of people working on this stuff. I think that, in particular over the last four and a half years, there has been a reasonable consensus across Departments about the direction of travel in Afghanistan.

Q142 Richard Benyon: The evidence we got from Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles suggested that even though the military were taking their orders by and large from NATO, there was still a lot of unilateral activity going on and papers were being written about Britain's view of the future of Afghanistan or Helmand. Is your experience that that activity has been going on, with different policy streams coming from different areas, and that there is a rather hubristic view that Britain somehow could dictate a solution on the ground in a province, or even in the country?

Pauline Hayes: No, I do not think so—I am putting my development hat on now. Whether you are working in a military sector, a political sector or the development strand in Afghanistan, it is really important that you do not operate in isolation; you have to operate internationally. In my work, I cannot just say, “The Brits are going to do this”. First and foremost, I discuss with the Afghans, because what we do should be guided by their priorities, strategies and so on, but then we will talk to the US, the EU and other bilaterals such as the UN, the World Bank and the IMF. We have to work in tandem to deliver in Afghanistan.

Q143 Richard Benyon: Did you feel that military decision making fitted in with what you have just described? Does that lead to internal conflict at times with the MOD and military people or even with politicians from different Departments who may not understand what you are trying to achieve on the ground and your time scales for that? There is quite a drive for politicians wanting to see much quicker goals achieved, so did you feel that that caused internal conflicts that were sometimes irreconcilable?

Pauline Hayes: There are tensions, inevitably. As I said earlier, development is a long-term game. It would be fair to say only that some of the military would get frustrated that we couldn’t do things quicker and politicians get frustrated that things can’t happen quicker, but we are where we are. We are working in a very fragile environment in Afghanistan. We are working with a very weak capacity Government at central level—sometimes it is a barely functioning Government. We are working with a nascent private sector and a nascent civil society. This is going to take time. We are always saying this, but that does cause tensions, inevitably. But we can only move as fast as we can move.

Q144 Richard Benyon: When we are operating in an alliance of different countries, does the fact that some of those countries have a different way of doing foreign policy, defence policy and aid and a different organisational landscape cause added difficulties in how decisions are taken?

Pauline Hayes: Again, it can cause tensions. Don’t forget that my counterparts in other countries are under the same pressures, so we all face those same tensions. But again it depends on their approach to development. It depends on how much aid they are putting into that country and whether they are taking a long-term perspective or whether they see themselves as putting in aid only for the very short term. There are all those dynamics going on as well. But I would say that over the last few years, there has been greater coherence among the development community than there was in the past. There are a number of reasons for that, but I think there is a greater movement together to speak with one voice and to make sure we act more coherently, and in a fragile environment like that, that is absolutely vital.

Q145 Richard Benyon: It is impossible to be specific, but if we were to find ourselves in another situation in another part of the world in which there was a requirement for a military response to be co-ordinated with development outcomes, would that now work more smoothly because of changes to decision-making processes, particularly in terms of being able to garner understanding of cultural and community issues at a very low level, or are we still going to be—

Pauline Hayes: I think that if that situation were to happen, we would see much better decision-making processes, but also better ways of working and better understanding of where each of us is coming from. We have learned a lot over the last decade and more.

Q146 Ms Stuart: I am trying to get myself out of the hole we seem to have dug ourselves into. I hear a lot of description of processes, learning and decision making, but I still don't know what it is we have done, so let me look at something very specific. I also note that you sometimes prefix an answer by saying, "Wearing my development hat". I am not entirely sure what that is meant to say. Does it mean "I need 20 years longer"? This is about how we achieve things, so let me get to the point. UK plc goes into a country like Afghanistan in a coalition and it has various means by which it tries to achieve an outcome, which is both short-term and long-term. One outcome is that we want people to change their behaviour. Let us just be clear: we wanted the Afghans to do certain things differently from the way they had done them before—like educate girls. It may be very culturally specific that a whole section of the Afghan population do not wish to educate girls, but we are trying to get to a point where we have to assert our values and say, "It is in your long-term interests to do so." In the decision-making process in which you are involved, you wear your development hat and the military wears its hard-power hat, because girls will not be able to go to school unless we can make sure they don't get shot or blown up on the way to school. Then there is a long-term political outcome. I am trying to understand this: in your dealings with politicians and the decision-making process, where do you pause and say, "What are the values we wish to assert—what is it we are doing?" rather than describe the process of doing it? Where in your work is that moment when you say, "Now we fulfil a specific function that is value loaded"?

Pauline Hayes: First I would say that this wasn't us saying that more kids need to be educated and more girls need to be educated—the Afghans wanted that as well, so we are responding to what they want.

Q147 Ms Stuart: Is that really all we do—responding to it? Don't we suggest some things to them that they might want?

Pauline Hayes: Yes, we do suggest, but we can't make them do it. It is a bit of a cliché that you can take the horse to water but you can't make it drink. They have got to want to do it. The Afghan Government wanted to expand education, or whatever, and we have helped them to do that. We have obviously pushed for more girls to go to school, because we think that is the right thing to do because of the opportunities it offers, which go far beyond education—I probably don't need to tell you that. But at the end of the day it has to be responding to them, and they want to do this.

Q148 Ms Stuart: Okay. Let us try a different example—the poppy crop. We don't want them to grow poppies. They don't particularly want to grow them other than as a revenue exercise. There is nothing redeemable about the process of growing poppies, so we cannot even argue about its merit. How did we arrive at the decision on what to do? There were some serious debates going on—for example, do we spray this stuff?—and then, whatever we did, it did not work. Tell me, where was that discussion going on?

Pauline Hayes: As I understand it, it has continued for many years. There have been long discussions about the way to tackle the poppy issue. The bottom line is that there is no magic bullet.

Q149 Ms Stuart: At the moment there is no bullet. They are growing more of the wretched stuff than they did before.

Pauline Hayes: Yes, but what DFID was advocating from day one was creating alternative livelihoods. You have to give them an alternative to growing poppies.

Q150 Ms Stuart: So why did that not work? That has been the story since day one. We have always known that the only way we are going to get the farmers off poppy growing is to create an alternative livelihood, but clearly that has not worked. Where is the analysis of why it has not worked—are you doing any analysis on why?

Pauline Hayes: We have done analysis, and others have as well. We have taken account of that analysis.

Q151 Ms Stuart: And the analysis said what?

Pauline Hayes: That we have to diversify.

Q152 Ms Stuart: Yes, but you knew that before. Has anything happened? In the past 10 years have we changed any part of our approach? This is something that we have known is a problem, and we thought we had the answer, but in between none of us have made it work. At what point do you step back and say, “This clearly isn’t working, is it?”?

Pauline Hayes: We have changed our views on this. The UK view now on counter-narcotics is very different from where it was a few years ago. But I think you need to talk to colleagues in the National Crime Agency and the Home Office on the switch in strategy in counter-narcotics.

Q153 Ms Stuart: No, it hasn’t changed. We are still against it.

Pauline Hayes: In terms of how we tackle it. The views of eradicating—

Q154 Ms Stuart: What I am trying to get to is this: as we are trying to improve the process of decision making we are trying to find the space in which someone, or a group of people, pauses and says, “Here are the facts on the ground. Here is our aspiration. It just is not happening, is it?” At what stage does the group of people say, “Where do we change tack? What we wish to happen is simply not happening.”?

Pauline Hayes: Those discussions have happened and decisions have been made in terms of what the UK strategy should be on counter-narcotics. It is not about eradicating poppy in Helmand, and so on. It is much more about intercepting the trafficking that goes on inside and outside Afghanistan and across the region. There has been a complete acknowledgment that we needed to change tack but, as I say, if you would like more details on that, we can get that for you.

Q155 Chair: Can I just have one more bite at the same cherry before I hand over to Derek? We don’t really see inside the machine well enough. When do you acknowledge failure? At what point does the institution say, “We really screwed this one up. We wasted five years doing something that didn’t work. Five years ago, we said that we were going to be able to significantly reduce poppy production. Five years ago, we set up rule of law programmes. We set up governance programmes. We were eliminating corruption. It didn’t work. It’s been a big failure. We’re holding these people accountable. We’re changing these structures”? Does

that happen? Is it just that we don't see it? From the outside, I ain't ever heard anyone say, "We've failed." All we hear is, "We've learnt some lessons."

Pauline Hayes: Those discussions do take place, and they now take place through the NSC process that I described earlier. There was a discussion on counter-narcotics at a senior officials' level. There were papers written saying, "This is the direction of travel that we think this needs to go in." That would get fed up to the NSC and a decision would be taken that this strategy was—

Q156 Chair: Put bluntly, you wrote a paper saying that this failed; it didn't work. What then happens? Do you fire people? Do you change procedures? Do you look back at how you got it wrong? What reforms did you then introduce to make sure that you would not make a similar mistake in the future? I don't mean on counter-narcotics. I mean learning the lessons in terms of what is wrong in the institution, because you will make a mistake about something else in the future unless you change that.

Pauline Hayes: We do document where things go wrong. I will speak for DFID now. A project goes through an annual review process, and at that point you measure progress against the original indicators that you set yourselves. It gets a score. This is all published; it is all freely available on websites. If the project is scoring below a certain level, we make a decision about whether to continue it, rectify it, stop it or whatever. A decision will be made at that point. Usually, that report will say, "Rectify it." Unless something has gone dramatically wrong, there is usually a good reason why it has not gone as well as you thought it might go—because of external circumstances or something changing that you had not foreseen.

But there will come a point where you will say, "Actually, this project just isn't working and we need to stop it." That is quite a difficult decision to take, because there are various stakeholders involved in that project, whether it be the partner Government you are working with or it could be a private sector or civil society organisation. If we really feel that this project has to stop, we will make that decision. It is documented and it is available. In terms of the lesson learning, all these documents have a section on lesson learning. Obviously, that then gets fed back into—it is a project cycle. In anything new that you are designing, you make sure that you are taking account of the lessons learnt with whatever the past intervention was. That is, again, in the next iteration of the next project business case.

Q157 Derek Twigg: In the early years following our intervention in 2006—I visited Afghanistan a number of times between 2006 and 2008—it was very clear that there was a big disconnect between what DFID was expected to achieve or could achieve and the views of, say, the military, the MOD or other Government Departments. I was there a number of times, and in my experience, there was clearly no clear agreement. In fact, I remember one DFID official saying to me, "Well, we'll get there in the end," or something along those lines. What I would like to know is: what do you think has changed since then in terms of the mechanics of how such decisions between Government Departments are arrived at to establish what can actually be achieved within the resources, military climate and governmental operations at the time? What has changed since then that would give us more confidence that we will not repeat that situation?

Pauline Hayes: There is a greater realism.

Q158 Derek Twigg: What do you mean by that? How would I feel that? How would I know that there is greater realism? What can you provide as evidence that that exists?

Pauline Hayes: If you were to see a project objective—what you are trying to achieve, the length of time you think you will take to achieve it and how you will know if you have got there—you would see a greater realism. Something that we talk about a lot in DFID is that in the past there was “too much optimism” bias. You like to think that you can get there faster than you can. I think that there is now a greater realism about how far and how fast you can go.

Q159 Derek Twigg: But who signs that off in Government and says that this is what we can achieve in x amount of time through development in a particular situation, say even in Afghanistan now for the next five years? Who signs that off? What is the mechanism for ensuring that there is a co-ordinated effort by all Government Departments involved?

Pauline Hayes: In terms of DFID’s work and operational plan, the Minister will sign that off.

Q160 Derek Twigg: Is that then agreed with Ministers in Defence, the Foreign Office or with No. 10? What happens?

Pauline Hayes: In putting together that operational plan, we will consult with other Government Departments.

Q161 Derek Twigg: So is it signed off via a Cabinet Committee or something like that?

Pauline Hayes: No, our country operational plan will be signed off by the DFID Minister but there will have been plenty of consultation before. As I mentioned before, it has to fit in with the broader NSC strategy. It has to cascade. That higher-level strategy for Afghanistan is there and our operational plan fits into that.

Q162 Derek Twigg: So if Defence, the Foreign Office or No. 10 said that they did not agree with your view, who makes the decision?

Pauline Hayes: That discussion would have to take place at the NSC level, if there were very strong views.

Q163 Derek Twigg: So it has taken place in terms of what we are currently doing in Afghanistan.

Pauline Hayes: Nobody has taken it to that questioning level. People were satisfied with what we were trying to do. I think that is because we had had the high-level discussions about the broader NSC strategy for Afghanistan, such that our work fitted in well. So there was not really anything—

Q164 Derek Twigg: You are saying that the NSC would have to act to overrule the Department if other Government Departments did not agree with what DFID is proposing.

Pauline Hayes: If there were serious questions, yes; but that is unlikely to happen because we are being guided by an overarching NSC strategy for Afghanistan.

Q165 Derek Twigg: A second example in policy is that there are different views in Government about counter-narcotics as opposed to development generally in Afghanistan. How are policy differences resolved between Departments?

Pauline Hayes: In different ways and at different levels. Obviously, there will be discussions, and I am thinking about the past now, on the ground about how to resolve counter-narcotics—

Q166 Derek Twigg: I am just concerned. Let me make the point before you respond. There is a strong view about what we do in our Department on counter-narcotics, but you have a strong view that you have to do x amount in Development. There is a bit of conflict here, which might cause a problem, because we are being too hard or not hard enough according to one part of that.

Pauline Hayes: There will have to be a healthy debate, obviously. If the issue cannot be resolved, the decisions now will be taken to the NSC. They would have that debate and a decision would be taken.

Q167 Derek Twigg: So the NSC will make these decisions now.

Pauline Hayes: Yes.

Q168 Richard Benyon: In terms of our inquiry into decision making, your Department can make decisions that could result in Defence and other people in Government not having to make a decision about whether to go to war. If you do the right development in the right ways, and support governance, society and the economy in an area, it could bring more stability. When you do your in-country calculations about whether a project is justified, are you absolutely embedded with the local post—the FCO personnel in-country? Is that decision making from the ground up now happening to ensure that any strategies that HMG might have through the Foreign Office in terms of stabilising an area and the development drivers of NGOs and others are merged and proper decision-making policy is being taken that could avoid the need for us to have more expensive conflicts?

Pauline Hayes: Yes. We are not doing the work in Afghanistan in isolation from other Government Departments, on the ground. It is important to remember that we are embedded in the British embassy in Kabul.

Q169 Richard Benyon: I mean in other countries—I am talking not just about Afghanistan but about Africa and places like that.

Pauline Hayes: Okay. We are working as one HMG to achieve whatever it is we are trying to achieve in that country. The embassy will have a UK strategy for that country. What DFID is doing development-wise will be part of that UK strategy, so we are working as one. That is not to say that there are not differences in directions of travel or how far or how fast—all the things I was describing earlier. We are basically working as one HMG, which is how it should be.

Q170 Mr Havard: Where to start is the thing, Pauline. I remember having a discussion with you in 2010. I think it was in Kabul—and there were very different discussions taking place in Kabul than there were in Helmand, among the Afghans. It was a pretty variable discussion among the Afghans themselves, equally as much as it was with us. There was a lot of

discussion about government, but what you were doing there was governance. It seems to me that there were very strong governance processes in Afghanistan and they are there still. They may not be the ones that we wanted to foster under our central Government process; but there is no lack of governance in Afghanistan. Whether you agree with it or not is a different matter.

So you were trying to change culture. You have talked about—I think it is the building influence overseas policy—is that what it's called?

Pauline Hayes: The building stability overseas strategy—

Mr Havard: That's it.

Pauline Hayes:—which is a cross-Government strategy.

Q171 Mr Havard: Yes. We had the conflict resolution pool, which is now called something else—I forget what. These were things that developed out of the PRT system—is that right? You said that you thought it was seven and a half out of 10. But presumably that is seven and a half out of 10 for co-ordination of the UK assets in-country, is it, as an operating PRT?

Pauline Hayes: No, no. When I gave it seven and a half out of 10 I was thinking of the PRT as a whole. The PRT was an international operation.

Q172 Mr Havard: As a concept—a process?

Pauline Hayes: As a concept, and also in terms of the results it was delivering. It was delivering some good results towards the end, in many ways. I can give examples of that.

Q173 Mr Havard: Against what was an in-country plan? If we are talking about Afghanistan in this circumstance, then the Afghans have got their plan. For example, George Bush wanted the turbine stuck in Kajaki dam before we left, so we spent a lot of money doing all that. There is no electricity coming out of it—it is not turning. From your point of view it might have been better to have smaller, decentralised generation systems, from rivers, solar and everything else. But that is not going to happen, is it? So there is co-ordination, but where does the policy co-ordination come in terms of deciding what is best for the development of the local economy?

Pauline Hayes: I know you don't like saying we are learning lessons, but I think we have learnt lessons.

Q174 Mr Havard: We have learnt a lot of lessons; what we are trying to figure out is whether we are applying any of these lessons.

Pauline Hayes: I think latterly we were applying them in Helmand. We were being more realistic about what could be done, whether it was getting power up and running, building roads, services, and so on. I think we were being more realistic and doing it in a more co-ordinated way. People would listen to what DFID had to say about timescales and the need for indicators, the need to build capacity and so on. The PRT did shift in those latter years from building things and doing things to supporting the local government to build their capacity. That shift did happen.

Q175 Mr Havard: So you were supporting the local government to do things rather than doing things for them; so that is your role in the function. What I want to get to is this. There is a lot of talk about the NSC now as the co-ordination process for Helmand, which seems conceptually the right thing and a good thing to do. Out of that come the political decisions, based on the advice that is given. That is cross-Government. It has got the Treasury in it; BIS is in it; you are in it; the Foreign Office is in it; our friends down the river are in it; the Home Office is in it; and the Border Force, presumably, is brought in whenever it needs to be. So it is a mechanism whereby you can have a whole cross-Government process. Descriptively, it looks great. But what is happening, for example, with the development in the Ministry of Defence of the idea of defence engagements, which Richard mentioned earlier, about how you get in front of some problems now, to you try not to be in a conflict situation in the first place and engage with countries longer term, along with DFID? You have a doctrine called Forward Defence or something similar, or is that what other people call your doctrine?

Pauline Hayes: I don't know; I haven't heard that.

Q176 Mr Havard: Well, there was a very different attitudinal approach to all of these things between the Ministry of Defence and DFID, wasn't there? There certainly was when I went to Afghanistan in 2003, 2006 or whatever. It was very different. It was different in Iraq. That presumably is resolved, so how do you see DFID and the Ministry of Defence developing a coherent doctrine that they can take into all of the discussions that they might have in the NSC?

Pauline Hayes: In a number of ways. I think the way we have increasingly had to work together on the ground in many different conflict situations, and humanitarian situations as well, means we have begun to understand each other better. We are different, but we understand each other and where we are coming from better. I think there is much more interaction now. DFID staff go on some of the MOD's training courses—command courses and so on—to understand the MOD, the culture, where they are coming from and also, frankly, to learn because there is some good stuff that we can learn from.

Equally, we have had one or two MOD staff seconded into DFID. We have the stabilisation unit, which is a joint FCO-MOD-DFID entity. I think there is a lot of cross-learning and cross-working going on there, which is good. We have a lot more interaction in terms of briefings, with senior military officials coming in for briefings ahead of going on whatever deployment it is, and vice versa. We have come a long way. I worked on Iraq 10 or 11 years ago—I was based in London, but visited frequently—and we have come such a long way; there is no doubt of that. That is not to say that there won't still be differences or frustrations, but I think if we were going into something else, as I said earlier, there is a much better understanding and there are much better ways of working.

Q177 Mr Havard: Do you think that there have been these institutional organisational changes that are going to make—

Pauline Hayes: Yes, I do.

Mr Havard: The decision making better and inform the decision making? How does that inform the politician? How is that done? Through the NSC?

Pauline Hayes: Formally through the NSC, but obviously they have their own informal mechanisms for talking to each other as well.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time and that draws the session to a close.