



Defence Committee

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

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Members present: Rory Stewart (Chair); Richard Benyon; Mr. Jeffrey M. Donaldson; Mr James Gray; Mr Dai Havard; Dr Julian Lewis; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Sir Bob Russell; Ms Gisela Stuart and Derek Twigg

Questions 280-351

Witness: **Major General Christopher Elliott**, (retired), author of “High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghan Wars”, gave evidence

Chair: Welcome to Major General Christopher Elliott. This is very good timing. General Elliott is the author of a book entitled “High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars”, and the Defence Committee is engaged in evidence sessions on decision making in defence policy in which we have focused specifically on a case study of the deployment of troops to Helmand and a case study of decisions about the aircraft carriers, in order to learn lessons and work out where the strengths and weaknesses of British decision making in defence lie. Thank you very much for coming. I am going to hand over to my colleague, James Gray, to begin the questioning.

Q280 Mr Gray: General Elliott, I apologise for not having read the book in detail. If my questions demonstrate that ignorance, you will have to forgive me, but I have been advised by people who have read it, so I hope my questions are reasonably well targeted. Your general thesis—your general attack or critique—on decision making at its highest, is clear and recognisable, but looking behind that general criticism, do you think it would be different if we were something other than a small to medium-sized military force in the world? The point I am really getting at is: do we have a pretence and a decision making structure that reflect a 250,000-person Army, and we are using that, as a junior coalition partner with a small Army, in the wrong way? Is there any justice in that analysis of the reason for our failures?

Major General Elliott: I think your hypothesis is correct.

Mr Gray: You are supposed to give longer answers than that.

Major General Elliott: Chairman, would you mind if I said two words at the beginning? I have seen all the previous evidence to understand what you want to ask of me, and I will

try to structure my answers accordingly. I noticed that if one doesn't answer the question, one gets told off pretty quickly.

Mr Gray: It's a very mild telling off.

Major General Elliott: First, my thing is historical. I am not up to speed with the new situation, although I know something of it. I left the Army in 2002; I have not been to Iraq or to Afghanistan, and I have not really been involved in the centre of Whitehall for a very long time. It is almost a generational thing now, because it has changed, so everything I say has that caveat to it.

Secondly, the primary sources for my work were interviews with the key players who were either of my generation or were my friends or colleagues. Therefore, I am very aware that they gave me privileged access, because they thought they were talking to one of their own clan, if you see what I mean, and I have to be very careful about respecting those confidences. I fear that I might pause occasionally as I work out whether I should be saying something. I realise that this is a public forum.

I view what I have written about through the prism of my own experience. I was in the Ministry of Defence in the previous decade to the decade I was reporting on, which ended in 2010, and undoubtedly things have changed since then, particularly the establishment of the PJHQ. Therefore, I did not have first-hand experience of it, but I think I started from a position where I could understand where they were coming from. Therefore, where I make rather sharp comments—I hope they are not attacks—it is because I could see the way the thing was going. That is what I reported on.

Finally, it was always going to be difficult for us as a junior coalition partner, following somebody else lead. You probably could answer every question with that, although I think it is deeper than that. We have to learn how to work within a coalition, if that is what we are going to do. I was looking at the apparent paradox that there were good, able, well intentioned, capable people who despite all that still had poor outcomes. That, I think, is a close cousin of your inquiry. It is an extraordinary coincidence that you are looking at the same thing that I have been looking at for the past three years.

Q281 Mr Gray: All right. What is it about the mix of relationships, albeit after your time, between the Chiefs of Staff Committee, the Chief of the Defence Staff and Ministers, with PJHQ and No. 10 thrown into the mix as well, that has produced a discombobulation, if that is the right word, in defence decision making? What single thing would you point to as being wrong in those complex relationships?

Major General Elliott: I would echo what Rob Fry said: there was a lack of clarity. I think everyone recognises that it was quite difficult to track down who was making the decision—who was responsible for it. If you read my book, you will see that I said there was not one bad defence politician in that period of time. Although they may have made mistakes, it wasn't that they got that wrong, but I think that, in particular, when the Prime Minister's attention during that period was not concentrated on the war that he had taken the country into, all sorts of things started to go wrong. I think it was Rob Fry who said in his evidence that you really do need one person in control of something as complex and as wounding as going to war. So I think it is the lack of a single person running the thing.

Q282 Mr Gray: Surely that is entirely simplistic? You could not have one person running the war. You could have one person who is ultimately responsible, namely the Prime Minister, but underneath the Prime Minister you have a whole complex of people providing the money, the matériel, the strategy—a whole complex of different people doing different things, taking perfectly legitimate decisions. Surely it must have been about the way they worked together, rather than there being one person responsible.

Major General Elliott: You are quite right; I gave a simplistic answer. What I meant was that one person “owned” the war; of course, he wasn’t doing everything himself, but if the Prime Minister gets remote from the core management of the war, that puts a lot of responsibility on other people to fill in and to try to make it work. In his evidence to the Chilcot inquiry, General Walker said that he got on extremely well with the Prime Minister and found him very receptive, but that he and the Prime Minister could agree something and then find that the agreement that they had made between the two of them got lost somewhere underneath. Unless energy is put in right at the top, you can have discussions and make agreements, but it is not going to happen because of the complexity of it.

Q283 Mr Gray: I am still trying to find one thing that’s wrong. May I ask you about something that happened after you left? Your views on it might be an interesting reflection on things. The removal of the three Chiefs from the Defence Board—no, four; there are now four Chiefs, because there is the Joint Chief—so the removal of the four Chiefs from the Defence Board means that, for example, when they gave evidence to us the other day, one after the other they disclaimed any responsibility for high strategy. They all said, “We don’t know—it’s nothing to do with us. You must speak about it to the Foreign Office, or No. 10, or someone else.” Do you think that the removal of the four Chiefs from the Defence Board may now or in future have some role to play in the sort of disconnect we are discussing?

Major General Elliott: The answer to that question is very long. I will answer it very specifically, but I hope that you will draw out some things, because I think that is the heart of the issue.

Before the Nott-Lewin reforms after the Falklands war, the CDS had represented the views of the three Chiefs, as there were then. With the Nott-Lewin reforms, the CDS became the supreme strategic commander, which was a big change. Over the period in which the PJHQ became his personal staff, as it were, reporting to him, the Chiefs became more and more isolated. You will have seen in the press Mike Jackson saying, “I had all this responsibility, because people thought that I was running the war, but I had no authority.” So you got to the position in the last decade where the CDS was the supreme strategic commander of the war, following the policy of the Government, but his Chiefs were not actively involved in it. That caused a great deal of unhappiness between them. You can have understanding on both sides. The Chiefs themselves were unhappy that they were excluded; The CDS was a very busy man; he was trying to prosecute this war and having to drag along a caucus with him would have required extra work. I argue in the book that that work was probably worth while in the long run, because it kept everyone together. That was such a fracture zone, in my view, that it has to be solved. They were excluded under the Levene reforms, and David Richards managed to set up the Armed Forces Committee which brought them back in again, but there has to be some clarity about where those people sit, and I can speak about that in more detail.

Q284 Ms Stuart: I want to quickly drill down something you said about the clarity of the decision-making process. The only Prime Minister I have first-hand experience of working with is Tony Blair. It was perfectly possible to have a meeting with him where there were four other people who put different views; we would leave the room and all of us would think, “He’s just agreed with us.” I am just wondering about the anecdote you were telling: is it that once you have the meetings, the process by which you then record and pursue what the two sides thought they had agreed on is lacking, or is it that they are clear what they agreed on and that is properly recorded but it somehow does not make its way down?

Major General Elliott: I think you have put your finger on one of the key points there. I argue strongly that there should be transparency about who has taken the decision, and I can show you some examples of where there was a lack of transparency. There has to be public accountability that that decision has been taken. I suggest that much more formal orders should be given and that there should be an auditable trail as to how those things went down. I agree completely.

Q285 Chair: You kindly suggested that you could give us a couple of examples of exactly what Gisela described. Can you give us two good examples to chew on before we move on?

Major General Elliott: Remind me what I said I was going to give her examples of.

Chair: You were going to give us examples of accountability and clarity in decision making, so ways of showing that the system would have benefited from knowing who had made the decision.

Major General Elliott: Yes, fine. I do not know the internal workings of the system at the moment, so I could be wrong, but, for instance, if the Chief of the Defence Staff is going to give orders to the operational commander at PJHQ, there is the feeling that that is what you are going to have to get on with; but it should be within the system that the Chief of Joint Operations must respond to that by saying, “I’ve got these orders, but they are difficult to carry out for the following reasons”—not denying them—“and the probability of success is not as great as you might think.”

Likewise, there has to be some device in the dialogue between the Prime Minister and the CDS, who is a very loyal person and wants to support the Government—that loyalty is almost one of the problems—whereby the CDS can say either, “What you’ve asked me to do is very difficult to do and may not succeed. Please go ahead if you still decide that’s what you want to do,” or, “It will only succeed if you’re prepared to put the other Government Departments to the wheel as well, because security can only do this much. Therefore, don’t go ahead with the security bit unless you’ve prepared to make sure that the other parts are there as well.”

In the book, I put it that there should be some constitutional remit put on the Chief of Defence Staff that eases the problem of him giving an opinion or appearing to be disloyal, which is to give a straight answer. It will not be a yes or no answer. It will be trying to, as it were, outline the risks, the probability of success—that is pretty difficult to say—as well as where it might go wrong and what will be necessary if it starts to go wrong, so that there is a public, recordable dialogue between the elements in the chain of command, before we drift into something that then surprises everyone.

Q286 Chair: This is very interesting. The most concrete example of that would, presumably, be something like Helmand, where you would imagine the Chief of the Defence Staff saying to the Prime Minister, “Yes I can do this, but I can do it if I have many, many more troops and resources on the one hand and if, on the other hand, the Foreign Office and DFID step up to the mark and sort out the governance and politics on the ground.” Is that the sort of thing you are imagining?

Major General Elliott: Spot on—and also add on, “What is your clear aim?”

Q287 Chair: Okay. The one thing I don’t quite understand about that is that the answer coming back to the military may well be, “Well, you’re being perhaps a little unrealistic here. It is not likely that DFID and the Foreign Office are actually going to sort out the politics and development on the ground because they are not really those sorts of institutions. They are not really able to do the kinds of things that you and the military are imagining, so if your counter-insurgency strategy depends on the Afghan Government being sorted out, well, that’s not going to happen.”

My experience of that is when you tried to have those kinds of conversation, it was quite difficult to really finish the conversation, because the general might well say, “Hey, that’s none of my business. I just do the military part of it. That’s somebody else’s situation, but if you give me that stuff, I can do it,” and you are saying again to the general, “Well, I am telling you that you are not going to get that stuff, so are you going to be able to do it?” It is at that stage that nobody quite says—you could see this on a very grand level with General McChrystal with his surge. He said, “My strategy will only work if the Afghan Government sort their act out,” but however much you told him that the Afghan Government were not going to sort their act out, he never eventually said, “So I’m not going to do my surge.”

Major General Elliott: It is not my territory because “I’m a simple soldier”. The whole thing is about finding some mechanism whereby the Chief of the Defence Staff can, with legitimacy, say, “Look, this has the following high risks in it and it doesn’t look as though it will completely succeed. Do you still want to go ahead?” without feeling that he has to do it. You put a constitutional remit on him to give an honest answer back again.

Q288 Chair: Let me try one last time. The problem sometimes may be—at least when you look at the US military you got this sense—there was such enormous optimism and determination to get the job done that they were not being completely realistic about the weaknesses of, for the Americans, the State Department or USAID and the improbability of sorting out the governance, development and politics. Therefore, what presented itself as a comprehensive, joined-up counter-insurgency campaign was really talking about that stuff but, in practice, the military was going to press on regardless, having essentially identified what the fatal flaw was in their strategy.

Major General Elliott: Yes, and I think that when things do not go right, it is quite difficult to find the person responsible. People turn around and say to each other, “Who on earth made this decision?” I am suggesting that somehow there has to be a mechanism so it is quite clear who made the decision and where the dialogue existed at various stages of the thing.

Q289 Mrs Moon: We found that in our report on the attack on Camp Bastion. It was like a slippery creature that just kept disappearing and nobody made the decision, and “Anyway it

was the Americans, not us,” so I welcome your suggestion. In conversations with your colleagues, did you ever discuss what the implications would be if that happened? Would it mean that people would be more careful in the decisions they made? Would they increasingly add caveats to the decision that they had made? Are you confident that it would lead to better decisions? One of the most frightening things that we heard was Admiral West saying that the decision had been made about the aircraft carriers but he did not know where or why; just that it had been made. You assume that everything happens at the top, whereas in fact most decisions were happening quite low down, with nobody held accountable.

Major General Elliott: I would give the same answer. I couldn’t agree with you more. What you have put there is absolutely right. Again, referring to my own text, I say that ideas floated out round the corridors of the Ministry of Defence like balloons and you could not see where they had come from. Rob Fry, in his dialogue with me, said that he had gone to one of the Chiefs’ meetings and somebody at the Foreign Office had suggested, “Why don’t the military do this?” and was pretty passionate about it. The Chiefs present therein felt that this was an instruction coming from the other side of Whitehall and that perhaps they ought to do something about it, but two weeks later, when the mood had changed, the very same person said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” So you have to have some very open accountability and transparency about where the instructions are coming from. The statement by Lord West is repeated many times. You got a very clear answer from him—he didn’t know where the decision had come from. We need some way of regularising who is making the decisions.

This is anecdotal, but I found when I was involved that there would be a discussion between the Prime Minister and other Prime Ministers—this was during the Bosnia time—and everybody would be appalled by what was going on, so I think they would say to each other, “Shall we see if we can do something?” but that would be translated into, “Would you like to see whether you can do something?” Then, your marvellous armed services are always eager to serve the country, so they say, “Yes, we think we can do something.” You then lose the thread as to who is responsible for this decision. From that looseness comes a comet’s tail of quite devastating bad things. Going to the act of war is such a fundamental thing that it should not be taken with that looseness.

Q290 Derek Twigg: May I come back—as you said, a large part of your book focuses on this—to the relationships with the CDS, the service Chiefs, the power of the various people in these positions and the advice that they are or are not able to give? In the book, you talk about the fact that, when Jock Stirrup became CDS, he was not party to the conversations and dynamics that led to the decision that the UK should take Helmand. The Army Chief at the time put it more pithily—you quote from a journalist—saying, “Search me, guv.” People find it quite remarkable that, for example, the head of the Army was not aware of this decision, but it was his service that was going to bear the brunt of the work in theatre. Can I push you a bit further on that? What do you think the service Chiefs should be involved in? How far should they be involved in decisions or consultation?

Major General Elliott: You were serving in the Ministry of Defence at the time, weren’t you?

Derek Twigg: Yes, and thank you for saying I wasn’t bad.

Major General Elliott: And thank you very much for reading the book as well. The remarkable thing I found—I was not looking for this—was that everybody said they had no problem with their Defence politicians; they were all very good at serving and wanted to do it. That doesn't come out of this dialogue. Everybody says, "The politicians got it wrong," but it is much more complex than that.

I explained how this system evolved. The Chiefs either have to be in the inner council and responsible, or they have to be out of it. For reasons I can come on to later, I think they have to be out of it; they cannot be held responsible in the court of public opinion for wars they have absolutely no control over.

I am going to be very careful what I say now, but Richard Dannatt and I have been friends over a long period of time, and I was, in some places, quite critical about him in the book. When I discussed this with him—I discussed all the comments with everybody I had written about—he didn't get it to begin with, but he then allowed me to put in an extra page which talked about why he'd done what he had and about the enormous frustration he felt. He was the public figure who the Army looked up to to solve all their problems—he was the person people rang up every day and told, "We've got casualties," so he took all of the emotional baggage of the thing—but he had no input into how the Army was being used. That was an impossible conflict of interest, and, somehow, we have to find a solution which squares that.

Q291 Derek Twigg: And what is your solution?

Major General Elliott: Do I have the Chair's permission to give a five-minute answer on this?

Chair: Please, yes.

Major General Elliott: But stop me—I know you will—if I go on too long.

If you are going to remove the conflict of interest between the Chiefs, who are there as what they are, but do not really have a share in running things, and the civil servants and the CDS, there are four elements where decisions need to be taken in the Ministry of Defence. There is the strategic operational command, which is now with the CDS, which is right and proper; that works to the PJHQ and that produces a good answer. There is the generation of combat power, which is with the single service Chiefs at the moment, and it should stay with them: they should be generating the combat power for the CDS to use—that means the training, the morale and all those sorts of thing. There is the equipment programme, and then there is MOD business.

The difficulty with being a Chief, it seems to me from the outside looking in, is that you have your finger in all of those pies, or have had. The Chief of the Defence Staff is concentrating on strategic operational command, but having very little to do with the equipment programme, and the individual service Chiefs are concentrating on the equipment programme and have very little to do with the strategic operation, so you go into a Chiefs of Staff committee and you have got, instantly, a conflict of interest.

For instance, the most important thing that the First Sea Lord had to do in the 10 years in question was to get the carrier launched, so everything that he did was through the prism of, "How do I get the carrier in the programme?" It did produce some resentment, because

it appeared that he was so concentrated on doing that—in his own mind, rightly so, because that is what he believed he was meant to be doing—that the Army felt that it did not get the right support from him on occasions. I use those words very carefully, because we are talking about good people trying to find an answer to things.

When I spoke to General David Richards, I was astonished, because I had not worked it out before. I asked, “Why did you allow these equipment things—the carrier and so on—to go that way? Are you in favour of the carrier?” I won’t tell you what he said! These equipment issues were big issues that were distorting the rest of the programme. He told me, “Well, I don’t have anything to do with the equipment programme.” I asked, “Where are the decisions taken?” He replied, “The decisions are taken by the Minister, talking to the single service Chiefs, who give advice. But they don’t come through me.” When I said to Air Chief Marshal Stirrup, “Why on earth didn’t you bang the heads together, because you had this period of dissension among the Chiefs?” He turned around—it’s in the book—and said, “Well, I didn’t command them. If I had told them to do it, they could have ignored me.” That is an extraordinary situation to be in. It seems to me—this is really what I was going to say right at the end—that you have to change the model.

There is also the PUS, who has the most unlovely position, because he is wire-brushed by Parliament if things are one penny out, which is an almost impossible target to meet. So he is going around the whole time trying to make sure that value for money is achieved, which runs into collision, as demonstrated between the civil servants and General Sir Mike Jackson most spectacularly, because one person is trying to give the services as much as they need and the other person is trying to do the same thing but within the available budget. So they are both coming from the right position, but it puts them into conflict. If you are looking for authority, responsibility and accountability, you cannot split them among other people, which is what is happening at the moment.

What is the punchline? There are a number of models. You could have the CDS responsible, as the strategic commander, for the equipment programme and the business—he could be responsible for the whole lot. You could have the CDS responsible for the operations and the equipment programme, with the PUS being responsible for the accountability side of things, as the accounting officer to Parliament. If you go further down from that, you get the present situation, where the responsibility and accountability are divided up into what you have there. Have I been clear?

To echo what Rob Fry said right at the end, I would say, “Make one person in charge.” Select someone who is clearly identifiable as the person who is responsible for things, and that probably is the CDS. You try and get over the ambiguity of the accounting officer side, which does not have a parallel. I know it is there to ensure that Parliament has control over its Army, which is a good point of view, but having one person, the PUS, responsible and accountable for the money puts him into conflict with the chap who is actually running the thing. I personally would make the CDS responsible for the whole thing, so that he could knit it all together.

How would he do that? In a top business model, you get the chief executive, and he has his finance officer and his operating officer, and then he has a council of wise men—those can be the operating divisions—and other people who come in. You would have this small caucus in charge and then you would involve the others to help with the decisions made, but they would not be responsible for the decisions.

I don't see that the situation will improve until there is some design that knits the three things together. General David Richards told me that he had tried to achieve that when he was discussing it with Lord Levene, but it was a step too far. He seemed to suggest that that is what he would have liked to do.

I'm sorry, that was rather a long answer.

Q292 Derek Twigg: No, it was very helpful.

Following on from that answer, in your book you also hit on the continuity issue. The CDS—it could also be the head of the Army—does three or four years and then moves on, even if a war or conflict has started, and someone new comes in and, as we have just heard, is not necessarily up to speed. Is there a case for saying that when we get into a conflict or war—I know that Jock Stirrup's tenure was extended—there should not be this acceptance that you do your three or four years and then you move on and that we need continuity, which is very important? Unless you are doing a bad job, we should extend the period for which these people are in post.

Major General Elliott: Yes, that is highly desirable, and in fact it is possible to do it at the moment. As you say, Jock Stirrup did—

Q293 Derek Twigg: But there were a number of changes, unfortunately.

Major General Elliott: Two things would improve the system much more. It really is extraordinary that senior officers do only two years in post. How on earth you get continuity in that case I don't know, and I suffered that myself. You need continuity in post, and you also need to become more expert in the field that you're in. There is the British thing that you are a generalist. That is true in the civil service and in the armed services. But there is a balance to be forged. I think that I am correct in saying that it has been most infrequently that an intelligence specialist has been made the Chief of Defence Intelligence. That seems incredible to me. You want people who specialise in doing strategic analysis to come to the surface, and the same is true for people who are in procurement. I think that this is well recognised within the services. There are two things: people should be longer in their post and their training should be better identified in relation to the role they hold.

Q294 Derek Twigg: Also in your book, you cover, and rightly so, the issue of intelligence. Again, you use a quotation: "General Sir Mike Walker observed later we do not have a clear intelligence picture on Helmand. It's an empty hole." How do you think that we can avoid these pitfalls in the future? Obviously, in the process of making decisions, intelligence is key. What do you feel was wrong structurally, and how can Ministers get a better idea of intelligence? Do they always have to rely on their advisers, be they military or civil service, or should they do more to gather it themselves by visiting these places more?

Major General Elliott: You've put your finger on something there. When I discovered that that had happened, I just couldn't believe that we would commit ourselves to an operation in Helmand not knowing who the enemy was. I have asked around quite a lot, and people have said, "Well, we had pretty good intelligence." The Helmand report the year before—I have not seen it in detail, but I've seen what has leaked out to the public—did identify that there was the chance of quite a lot of Taliban in that area and that we did

not seem to have any real idea of the complexity of the tribal structures there. I think that it's incredible that we went in there with so little understanding of what we were doing. What I also found difficult to understand was that we could do that on a wing and prayer and that we did not have a tremendous back-up of options that we could immediately trigger if we discovered that it was worse than we had thought.

Q295 Derek Twigg: We didn't have a plan B.

Major General Elliott: Yes. If you don't know something, as has been clearly stated there, then as a military person, the first thing you do is have something in your back pocket that buys out that risk.

Q296 Derek Twigg: Why would the military not make that clear to Ministers: "We don't have the intelligence we need to make both the tactical and the strategic decisions in terms of military involvement on the ground"?

Major General Elliott: Having said that these were all able and capable people, I would put it straight back and ask what the Secretary of State and the CDS did about it, and why they did not ask that question.

Q297 Derek Twigg: How do we fix that?

Major General Elliott: I think it is in the character of the leader.

Q298 Derek Twigg: So it is all about the individuals rather than the structure.

Major General Elliott: It is about the top individual. The top individual has to say, "Well, I have been given all this by the staffs—well, fine. You have told me that you don't know how many people are there. Why not? Can you be more specific, and what am I going to do about it?"

Q299 Derek Twigg: To follow on from that, do you think the MOD has reached the right balance between the military, civilian and political input into decision making and how can the tensions be resolved between those three groups in the MOD?

Major General Elliott: I gave an answer, which I think is probably the one I want to stick with: you cannot have the accountability and responsibility split between them.

Q300 Derek Twigg: I am talking about the balance. Obviously, they surely all have to be involved at some point.

Major General Elliott: You focus down those three elements on to singular people, and you don't allow several people to own part of the piece. So you either put the PUS in charge of it or the CDS. I am afraid I have not given you the answer you were looking for there.

Q301 Derek Twigg: There is a concern about the balance we are trying to find. Obviously, Ministers are ultimately responsible to the Prime Minister, but in terms of the balance in how those decisions are reached, there still has to be this input no matter who is put in charge at the top

Major General Elliott: Yes, but I think it is too diffuse at the moment. To try to give you a better answer, I think that everybody is involved. They all have their part to play, but it should be quite clear who took that decision. Knowing the people involved, I find it incredible that they allowed Helmand to go ahead knowing what the intelligence was, because I know them to be very good people. The only way you can understand that is by saying too many people were trying to take this decision, so it got confused.

Q302 Dr Lewis: General, congratulations on your book. The parts of it that I have read are written with great clarity. The problem that faces this Committee is that there is no such clarity in the decision-making processes, and that is what we are trying to resolve. May I put a couple of propositions to you to start off with? Would you accept that there needs to be a mechanism to provide politicians and Ministers with coherent and agreed military advice? Would you like to tackle that one first?

Major General Elliott: Well, there is. The CDS is responsible for all the military advice given to the Prime Minister. If the Prime Minister and the defence politicians lack good advice, it is the CDS who has failed them.

Q303 Dr Lewis: So it all comes down to one individual in the post of the CDS.

Major General Elliott: Are we talking about operations or equipment?

Q304 Dr Lewis: I am talking mainly about strategic decision making. That is the bit with which we are mostly concerned for this inquiry.

Major General Elliott: The trouble is—this is where I think they have tripped over—that strategic decisions are required in relation to equipment, and they have an enormous effect on the way that the thing turns out. Anyway, if I go back to the operation—

Q305 Dr Lewis: Let's stick to—not even operation; let's stick to the strategic level of decision making about the wars in which we get involved. I am looking at the military input to the decision-making process that ultimately, of course, will be made by the Government.

Major General Elliott: My understanding is that it lies entirely with the CDS since the Nott-Lewin reforms. He should then take the best advice and poll it himself. That is a correct position.

Q306 Dr Lewis: You think it is?

Major General Elliott: Yes.

Q307 Dr Lewis: Right. If we look at page 208 of your book, for example, you quote with apparent approval Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, who, as you know, has given evidence to the Committee. He said that he had watched the then CDS “dominate and marginalise the other chiefs who were cut off from discussion and work around Ministers and civil servants so as to handle the Prime Minister alone.” You also say, a little later on the same page: “What seems to have happened is that the dialogue that once took place between the CDS and his chiefs was replaced by a more focused discussion between the CDS and his leading experts at PJHQ and on the central staff, not least because they were subordinate in rank, hence leaving the position of the CDS unthreatened.” Similarly—this is the last quote—on page 221, in your conclusions, you say: “As the decade progressed, the Chief of the Defence Staff increasingly

became a single focus for the conduct of military operations. This certainly delivered focus, but it cut out wider influence which might crucially have questioned assumptions and conclusions...Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup almost single-handedly had to handle these matters, but did not consult either his chiefs or his permanent under-secretary.” You still think it is a desirable model to have everything focused on this one individual.

Major General Elliott: First of all, I do not approve of what Sir Sherard said. I put that in there to show what he had said.

Q308 Dr Lewis: The other quotes seem to agree with that proposition.

Major General Elliott: I got your drift completely. The circumstances put the then CDS under intolerable pressure. Anecdotally, he did not seem to have the input from No. 10 that he might have expected. He seemed to be having to work it out largely by himself.

Q309 Dr Lewis: But was that not entirely predictable when all these functions are loaded on to the shoulders of a single individual?

Major General Elliott: What he has to do, if he finds himself in that situation, is to get a structure underneath him that allows him to discharge those things. In some respects, the Chiefs of the Defence Staff have been surprised by the position they have found themselves in. They did not, as I said at some length, have the education, training or familiarity with strategic thinking that would have made it an easier ride for them. I can see where you have made a disconnect between my arguments.

Q310 Dr Lewis: I am not trying to catch you out at all.

Major General Elliott: No, I know.

Q311 Dr Lewis: I am trying to work with you. I have got an end in mind that will come as no surprise, because you have read the transcripts of the earlier sessions. I suffer a greater disadvantage than you. Although you say that you have only direct experience and researched a past period, the period I am familiar with is the planning process during the latter part of the second world war and thereafter on what Britain would have to do to defend herself in the post-war period. What impressed me massively then was how the Chiefs of Staff as a committee was clearly the forum for debate for reconciling the tensions that always will exist between the single services. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff was the first among equals and collective decisions were clearly made and clearly stuck to.

The strange thing is that everything we hear in the course of this inquiry is people saying, “We did not know where the buck stopped. It was not me, it was someone else.” It all boils down to saying, “It is all on the shoulders of one individual.” I am not surprised that the system is dysfunctional. Do you not think that it is an absurd situation that the people who rise to the top of the three services are put aside, out on a limb and looking on, perhaps aghast, totally disagreeing with what might be going on in a military campaign? Is that not a preposterous structure to have?

Major General Elliott: I think not. I followed your arguments, but I think they probably had just as many active debates after the war as we have had at this stage.

Q312 Dr Lewis: Yes, but they resolved them in an identifiable forum in a single committee, and then they got on with it on the basis of decisions that were clearly made.

Major General Elliott: I do not believe it was as even-tempered as you were suggesting. I think it was just as difficult. But that was describing a much bigger military structure.

Q313 Dr Lewis: So we have a small committee dealing with a bigger military structure, and we are saying now that we cannot find a coherent way of managing a smaller military structure and a small campaign. At the same time, we are saying that it is all down to one man—the person who operates as the individual in the CDS’s role. Isn’t it unsurprising that we are in this messed-up situation?

Major General Elliott: I do not completely agree with what you said there. You have to remember, as I am sure you have, that the reason this singular authority came on to the CDS was because of our desire to be joint, which is an important thing to be done in an interconnected military, with the shrinking size of the individual services meaning that they probably did not deserve their own hierarchies in the same way as they had had before, and the centralisation, because of the lack of money, trying to get efficiencies by bringing it all together. Putting one person in charge is the result of all those strands coming together.

If you wish to go back to the original arrangement, you would then have to set up individual fiefdoms within the individual services so that they could run their own things. That could answer General Jackson’s problem that he appeared to be in charge but he did not have any of the levers to do it. Of course, the Americans still have their services individually bidding to Congress for their funds, and they are completely self-contained entities. You would have to go back to that if you wanted to get a different system, but we are where we are. We are very joint, for lots of good reasons. To be very clear, from what I see, it is inconceivable that you could go back to a shared system, given the other things that we have done to centralise.

Q314 Dr Lewis: But isn’t it true that no matter how jointly you try to make an individual think, there will always be tensions between the individual services and their needs and perspectives, which have got to be resolved somehow? My contention is that the best way to resolve that is in an identifiable forum where the arguments can be aired and agreements to resolve these tensions can be reached, even if a bit of bad temper takes place in the process.

Major General Elliott: Nobody can argue with that, but I am arguing that, in the situation we find ourselves of having the CDS as the person responsible, a more collegiate model would not fit quite so well into this system.

Q315 Dr Lewis: I do not see that it is necessary to stop the CDS being one level above the Chiefs of Staff committee, but I put it to you that the Chiefs of Staff committee should not be isolated from the decision-making process on military campaigns; it should be directly in the line of command. It is, as I say, a preposterous situation that you rise to the top of your service and then find yourself, exactly as you described the various CGSs saying, taking all the hits for what is going wrong with the war when in fact they are barely being consulted.

I remember having a conversation with one Chief of the Army, in which I said, “Isn’t this a crazy policy to be trying to eradicate poppy, because if you do that you are acting as

recruiting sergeant and driving poppy farmers into the arms of the Taliban?” He said, “I do not disagree with a word of what you say.” I did not ask the obvious question of why the Army was doing that. Would you not agree that there is something dysfunctional and fragmentary in the decision-making system that we have for military campaigns, because nobody knows where the buck stops?

Major General Elliott: I respect your argument, but I do not agree with you.

Q316 Mr Havard: On the same sort of area, I recall that soon after David Richards got the job of CDS, he came and gave evidence to the Committee. I remember his saying at that stage that he was now in a position where he did not direct the Chiefs of Staff. Things have moved on, and you have described the Levene proposals that effectively pushed him even further out. Then he did the process of putting together his committee because he was going to be on the board and they were not, but at the same time they have now got procurement functions and so on. You have certainly said, as I understand it, that their position is diminished. I think your quote was something like, “They now carry out a function within a bureaucracy”—without having the power that goes with it. This business about how they then commit to what to buy and all those things—you made a point about procurement being equally as strategic as other things—means that there is an issue here that we have to examine a bit further. As I understand it, they always had the right to go directly to the Prime Minister—

Major General Elliott: It still exists.

Mr Havard: That still exists, yes. Graeme Lamb, in his characteristic way, said something like, “Perhaps they were not being honest about what they were saying because they are looking after where their futures are.” The striking thing about the evidence that the Chiefs gave when they came before us more recently was that they were echoing this very largely, and saying, “You will have to go and ask our masters about this”, and we’re going, “What? Who is that? Is that the PUS?” They were arguing that they now no longer have this influence, very directly, and that they had someone controlling them. They suggested that all they were doing, which is what you said, was to carry out the bureaucracy and the function—they were not involved in the strategic activity or decision making. What is the structure? Should they be on the board? Is that the way of resolving it? Or should there be something like the Chiefs of Staff committee, of the type that Julian described, to inform the individuals on the board better?

Major General Elliott: I am not sure that I can help you much more on this, because you have to be a Chief to be able to give a proper answer, but I do not see the Chiefs coming back into the pre-Nott-Lewin reforms way of things, because so much has been stripped away from them. They got their money back, but it is only really for the smaller programmes—

Mr Havard: Set that aside for a moment. We are going down a rabbit hole—

Major General Elliott: No, it is not a rabbit hole—

Q317 Mr Havard: Let us take a different position then, and say, “Okay, fine, they are not going to come back, that structure is not going to be resolved.” How then is the tension between what is clearly the military side of the MOD and the civilian side of the MOD going

to be reconciled? That now seems to be the place where some of this is coming from, and that is all now collapsed into “the board”. Is that the answer?

Major General Elliott: I have learnt both in my military life and in my commercial life that the more singular a focus you put on one person, the better clarity of decision making you get. I think that needs to be the guiding principle of what you are going to be doing. So there should be absolute clarity. Wherever there is a diffusion of that, you are going to get trouble. My model—I don’t think it is worth very much—would be for the CDS and the finance officer/operating officer, however you structure it, to be running the thing with a wise council of the involved parties giving him advice.

Q318 Mr Havard: To do that, does he need direct control of the Chiefs, because he has not got it now?

Major General Elliott: He has control—this is the absurdity—of part of the Chiefs. He has control of the war-fighting side, but he does not have control of the equipment programme. I write at length how these two responsibilities collide. You have got to somehow find a device that takes out that collision.

Q319 Richard Benyon: General, you gave an interview—I think to *The Times*—in which you were quoted as giving two reasons why you felt, “good men did bad things”. The problem you identify is twofold: first, the men at the top were able and diligent, but they did not have a proper understanding of strategy; and, secondly, they were too supine in front of demanding politicians and hampered by the byzantine structure of the MOD. In terms of our inquiry, one part is relevant for us—you could argue two—which is, first, is there enough support, training and career development given to people who are clearly going to the top, in order to make them man up when they are told to do something that they intrinsically believe that they are unable to deliver or that is wrong? Secondly, has the byzantine structure of the MOD changed for the better? Can you give an indication of where you believe we now are on those two areas?

Major General Elliott: I don’t know, because I am out of date, but I have a view. Is that useful?

Richard Benyon: That is exactly what we want, yes.

Major General Elliott: Right, the first thing is that I do not remember saying “supine”—

Richard Benyon: It was not in quotes; it their interpretation.

Major General Elliott: No. I tried always to be fair, and if I said it, it was not completely what I meant. But they were too loyal to the system and didn’t ask the hard questions. You could also go on to quote me as saying that I felt they concentrated on being doers, rather than reflecting about whether the orders they had been given were workable in the long term. That is a very important argument I make—about the co-operative MOD. Right at the beginning of the book, I gave that ridiculous story of the air mobile brigade going into Bosnia. Have you read that bit?

Richard Benyon: No.

Major General Elliott: I'll leave you to do that. But a complete misunderstanding there meant we sent the wrong brigade. Yet we were very willing to try to do what our masters wanted.

As far as the strategy is concerned, because it is delivering results etc., which gets people to the top of the services, the more conceptual, longer term thinking is not given quite the same emphasis. At the back of the book, I make a strong recommendation that the people who are going to be the strategic commanders have education in strategy. I make the comparison between the lack of tertiary education in the top people, compared with their American opposite numbers. General Martin Dempsey, as a cavalry officer, had a science degree and three masters, one of which was in strategy. I don't mean to say that that necessarily makes you a better person, but it does get you into a conceptual way of thinking.

Nothing like that exists in the present system which is actively used by those who are going to be the Chief of the Defence Staff. It was a terrible accident of history that none of the Chiefs of that period had a tertiary education; they had been educated to do so much, but they weren't educated in the wider things that university could bring. That has changed, because David Richards had an international affairs degree, and Nick Houghton also has a higher degree. It may be that that is just an accident of history and will not be repeated.

One of the founding experiences in my life was that I did a defence fellowship when I was 40—the scariest thing I ever did. I was left alone for a whole year and told to make up a title and come back with an answer in the form of an MA thesis at the end of that time. Having been, over the last three years, to Oxford and done the research fellowship thing, I think it would be hugely beneficial if all people on promotion to two-star rank took six months off and were required to study in a strategy atmosphere at one of the universities and to produce a thesis. That would do two things. First, it would get them to reflect on what they were doing—there is not enough time for reflection about where they are going and what they are doing—and, secondly, it would give a good indication of whether they had the intellectual mettle or aptitude to work in the conceptual higher strategic space.

Q320 Richard Benyon: That is a very interesting recommendation, and one we should do some work on ourselves. In your research, when you were talking to United States Chiefs or ex-Chiefs—

Major General Elliott: I didn't.

Q321 Richard Benyon: Well, perhaps you can draw on your experience of working with other nations. What we like, as politicians, is that the armed forces have a can-do attitude, whether it is kinetic warfare, helping us out at the Olympics or some humanitarian effort. Do you think we ought to encourage them to be more questioning and demanding of politicians? Perhaps they are in other countries.

Major General Elliott: I am not sure of the structures, but from my discussions with Americans, there is this constitutional thing in America. The President and the combatant commander have this relationship, so it is a much closer thing there. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs is not included in that command chain. So, I think I would agree with you.

Q322 Richard Benyon: Following up that point, isn't the Royal College of Defence Studies in Belgrave Square precisely what we are supposed to be using to create that intellectual rigour?

Major General Elliott: You see in my book that only two of the four Chiefs of the Defence Staff went through the Royal College of Defence Studies. I find that extraordinary, because it is set up to do exactly that, but they have this expression that they were travelling too fast, on the promotion track, to attend it.

Q323 Richard Benyon: Do you feel qualified to talk about the role of the NSC?

Major General Elliott: No.

Q324 Sir Bob Russell: General, earlier on, you referred to Britain being a junior coalition partner. That resonated with me, because I think junior coalition partners can sometimes punch well above their weight and achieve things that they would not achieve if they were not in a coalition. Would you agree that that is the case?

Major General Elliott: I think that being in a coalition is a new specialty. It is a fact of life, and we have to try and find a way through this, and I am not sure we have found the answer. What I take issue with is hearing Defence Ministers consistently saying that it is a virtue to punch above your weight; I think that is crazy, because you are bound to be found out at some stage. What shines through this is that we went into commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan not prepared to see it through however bad it got, so we found ourselves in a terrible position of either having to reinforce apparent failure or withdraw. That has a direct locus back to the idea that Britain as a small country should punch above its weight. Should we be Greece to Rome? Well, that is different. Should we try and provide influence to the superpower? Yes, we can do that, but I think it is absolutely essential that we should not say things that we are not prepared to see through to the end. So I don't think punching above your weight is at all a military virtue.

Q325 Sir Bob Russell: Okay. Do you share the view expressed by some Americans that Her Majesty's Armed Forces in their current size and condition are no longer able to provide the full support for the leading power, namely the United States, as they have in the past?

Chair: Sir Bob, that is perhaps slightly outside—

Sir Bob Russell: I am aware of that Chairman, but—

Chair: It is a report on decision making, so if we could try to focus on decision making—

Sir Bob Russell: I recognise that, but you have allocated me questions and I am asking questions. It is not my fault if other people have eaten up an hour and a bit, is it? If you don't want me to ask the questions, I'll stop there.

Major General Elliott: No, I have an answer for you.

Sir Bob Russell: No, I'll finish—that's it. If I am not allowed to ask the questions, I stop asking the questions. I'll leave it there.

Q326 Chair: To continue with that, how far do you believe that budgetary constraints affect decision making in defence policy?

Major General Elliott: They are central to decision making. You can only do what you can afford. The trick is to work out consistent decision making in budgetary matters. What we have seen is inconsistency, where things have gone backwards and forwards. We delayed the aircraft carrier for a year, because we could not generate enough funds to keep it going. We cancelled a well advanced infantry fighting vehicle because we could not find the funds to do it, and yet, we had spent years getting to those positions. So I think that good housekeeping is at the centre of everything, and everybody tries to do it, but somehow the consistency does not seem to come through.

Q327 Mrs Moon: I know you have generally been very complimentary about Ministers, or certainly not as critical as some have. Do you think that Ministers were well enough equipped, supported and advised to take the decisions for which they were going to be held accountable by Parliament?

Major General Elliott: I spoke at length with Des Browne—Lord Browne of Ladyton—who was very open and said he did not have any equipment to do the job. He had every good intention. He said “After two years, I would have been a much better Secretary of State.” That is the simple answer, but I think that the key for politicians is asking the questions. They can exercise enormous leverage by asking the right questions. I use the example of President Obama, who, when he was asked to do the surge into Afghanistan, took six months to give an answer. He started off by saying to the military, “What’s the aim?” They said, “Well, to kill Taliban.” He said, “Would you like to think again and come back with a proper aim?” It went on, and when they decided what the aim was, they had to answer questions. I think it is entirely within the gift of a generalist politician to be a very effective Secretary of State.

Q328 Mrs Moon: Did you come across any suggestion that asking awkward questions of the military made you deeply unpopular and led to suggestions elsewhere that you should be moved on?

Major General Elliott: As a politician?

Q329 Mrs Moon: Yes, as a politician.

Major General Elliott: No. I never saw any of that at all. Remember, I didn’t rise to the top, but in every contact I had with politicians I could see where they were coming from. There was an easy dialogue between me and them.

Q330 Mrs Moon: My colleagues asked about the rotation of senior military personnel when making decisions. Given that Des Browne said he was a better Minister after two years, what would your comment be about the rotation of Ministers? If, at the peak of their expertise, they are moved and suddenly you start all over again, is there a risk there?

Major General Elliott: Mrs Moon, you have answered your own question. It is hopeless, actually. I must come back to what I said. Wherever I went, people would not point a finger at their Ministers; they said that they were doing the absolute best they could. That is quite interesting.

Q331 Mrs Moon: Where is the balance?

Major General Elliott: Three or four years. Geoff Hoon did three or four years. He was learning the job, and he was pretty consistent.

Q332 Mr Gray: For the sake of argument, is there any truth in the counter, which used to be the traditional way of doing things in the British civil service, namely that the civil servants—in this case, the military as well—advise and have the expertise, and the Secretary of State’s job is to apply political decision-making processes and decide between the options offered to him by the professionals? In which case, what you want is a good politician, rather than a defence expert, so it doesn’t matter how long they are there for.

Major General Elliott: We agree.

Q333 Mr Gray: No, you can’t agree with both. A moment ago, you agreed with Madeleine and said that we should not turn over Ministers as quickly as we are doing. If you agree with my thesis, which is that generals and civil servants should ask the questions and offer the options, and the job of the politician is to make the political judgments about them, it wouldn’t matter if he was in there for a year or even less. It wouldn’t matter, because we do not want experts; we want politicians.

Major General Elliott: No, of course they cannot come in for a day and go out again. Military operations are very complex, and it takes you a while to get up to speed with them. I don’t think there is an incompatibility with what you are saying.

Q334 Mrs Moon: So where do we get that balance?

Major General Elliott: I don’t know anything about it, but I would have thought that three years is the absolute minimum for a Secretary of State. Perhaps a better answer is that they should see through one SDSR and so see the consequences, but that is five years, isn’t it?

Q335 Mrs Moon: It is. In Afghanistan, do you think there was enough political control over military activities? One of the areas that we have frequently gone back to in my time on this Committee is the decision to go north in Helmand and the mess that that was. At the same time, there was a turnover of both military and political people. In Afghanistan, was there sufficient political oversight, or was too much left to the military in the decision-making process?

Major General Elliott: You are asking a very difficult question.

Mrs Moon: That is our job.

Major General Elliott: I agree. I’ve got all sorts of opinions. There clearly wasn’t enough. What evidence do I have of that? People said that they did not receive enough political interest in what was going on. That is understandable, because the rhythm of the war was at least 10 years and the rhythm of the Government was re-election after five, so when you start getting to the re-election point, you start having to worry about other things. Somebody once said that democracies cannot go to war these days because of the difference in time scale between the two. No, there wasn’t enough.

Q336 Mrs Moon: Was that because, as you suggested, the political attention was focused on the political calendar, or was it, as Sherard Cowper-Coles suggested, because politicians were not being fed uncomfortable truths?

Major General Elliott: Oh no. I heard that in a previous meeting. Absolutely not—there is no way that these decisions would have been hidden from the politicians. I just don't believe that. The politicians have their SpAds, their private secretaries and things like that, and at the Ministry of Defence news goes round in seconds. I just don't believe, whatever somebody said in a previous session, that they didn't know what was going on. I just don't believe that.

Q337 Mrs Moon: That wasn't in the Ministry of Defence; it was in the Foreign Office that the squashing of information was—

Major General Elliott: No. Forgive me, but in one of your excellent inquiries into Afghanistan in whatever it was, 2006—

Mrs Moon: Oh, that was 2006.

Major General Elliott: You ended up by saying that the military had hidden some facts from the civilians.

Mrs Moon: We did.

Major General Elliott: Yes. I don't believe that. I just can't see it could have happened, because the engagement between the military and the civilians is so close within that organisation in terms of wanting to know what is going on, and one of the great virtues of the civil service is that they protect their politicians extremely well; as soon as they hear of something, they will be straight in and telling them. Let me put it more cautiously: I didn't recognise at all what was concluded there.

Q338 Mrs Moon: I suggest you go back and listen to the evidence that we heard.

Major General Elliott: I have read it. Could I just say one thing? As a researcher, I had two invaluable sources of information. One was this House of Commons Defence Committee. The way Bruce George, James Arbuthnot and the teams then wrote down the contemporary evidence is gold—it's gold dust.

Q339 Ms Stuart: Following straight on from that, when in your book you describe John Reid's decision to go into Helmand, you say this was a failure of strategic imagination. People were given the facts, but somehow didn't quite work out that two plus two could make four and on occasions even five.

Major General Elliott: What you are meant to do with that couple of pages is to make up your own mind as to whether anybody could possibly have gone through all that process and simply suggest they didn't know what was going on. Even if that was true, their job, as the Secretary of State, was to say, "What are the five bad things that are going to go wrong here? I really want to know what the situation is with those things." Whatever the evidence that has been given—I did try to talk to him about it, to try to find out about it—I was not convinced by that. I didn't say—I just said it was a failure at least of strategic imagination.

Q340 Ms Stuart: I am beginning to get an impression of some of the decision-making processes we hear being described to us. I sit here and think, "If this was my team meeting in the office on a Friday morning, I would have lost my rag by now. I would have said, 'So you

don't know? So why didn't you go and find out?" There are two strands at this stage of the inquiry. I would like you to set out a bit of your thinking on these points. To what extent are there individuals and structures that could do more with the positions they have if only they were willing to be responsible for things? Combined with that is the argument that when the last Labour Government turned Crown servants into civil servants, the system and loyalty to the system changed. It went from being about the Crown to being one of individual ambition, which would feed into the idea that however much you create a system that allows for people to take responsibility, they may not actually be willing to do so.

Major General Elliott: You are absolutely right. I go back to what I said previously about the need for transparency on who is making the decision. I can only say what I experienced, and when I was in the Ministry of Defence, it was jolly difficult to find out whether the military were egging on No. 10—"Oh, we'd like to do this"—or No. 10 was saying, "Can you do it, and could you give us the cheapest price for doing it?" It goes back to the debate that Dr Lewis and I had: how do you find something that makes it much more transparent? It seems to me that the only way you can do that is by having singular points of responsibility and accountability. If there are different people in the system, then on a good day, success has many fathers, but on a bad day, nobody is around to take the blame.

Q341 Ms Stuart: Tony Blair, in a different context, once talked about the usefulness of creative ambiguity. Would the reduction of the possibility for creative ambiguity in the decision-making process therefore help? Is that the problem?

Major General Elliott: Yes, it is. In fact, I quote—have you read the book?

Ms Stuart: I have dipped in and out.

Major General Elliott: You are very kind. There is a bit early on about my personal experience. I was talking to John Major—I was advising him about going into Bosnia—and I said, "Prime Minister, you've got to make up your mind, because we need to get on with this, because this is a great military machine that is going." He looked around and said, "Christopher, I live in a world of ambiguity, and I'm going to keep things ambiguous for as long as possible."

Q342 Ms Stuart: For the record, there have always been differences in decision making. Some Prime Ministers will not make a decision until the last moment because they want to keep their options open.

Major General Elliott: That is good statecraft.

Ms Stuart: Then there are some Prime Ministers who do not make a decision because they are terrified of making mistakes.

Major General Elliott: I can't comment on that.

Ms Stuart: But that is the problem, is it not?

Q343 Derek Twigg: It was good to hear you mention the strategic imagination. You also mention strategic curiosity. Do you want to enlarge on that a bit?

Major General Elliott: If you imagine this great system that we saw going into Helmand—let us take that example, because Mrs Moon has concentrated on that one, too—how on earth do we get to the position where we do what appears in hindsight to have been a stupid thing, which was to put a too-small force into an area where there was a possibility that it was going to be overrun or over-extended? These are decisions taken by—

Q344 Derek Twigg: I understand that. Perhaps I have not made clear the point I am trying to get at. Is it something that you naturally have to have, or can you can be trained and briefed into it? Does it just depend on individuals, or can the system encourage strategic curiosity? That is what I am trying to get at.

Major General Elliott: The answer is that it has to be recognised within the promotion system and value given to it. I think that more training—

Q345 Derek Twigg: And that is not being done?

Major General Elliott: I think they were doers, as I said.

Derek Twigg: Going back to—

Major General Elliott: I will try to be a bit fairer with you. I had to work out whether people had done wrong things or not, so I had to work out where there were failings, and I came to the conclusion personally that there was a failure of strategic imagination on this. That did not make them bad people; it just showed why this thing had gone wrong. If that is a failure, you want to correct that. You want to have people who are able to see the bigger picture.

Q346 Derek Twigg: That certainly has to be part of their development as senior officers, and it is not and has not been in the past.

Major General Elliott: That is a difficult question. I am sorry, but I am going to sound like a cracked record. At the top of the organisation we have people who are brilliant at doing things. We need to add to that: they must not do any less on that, but they must also develop skills of strategic analysis.

Q347 Derek Twigg: When you started to write the book, you would have had some idea in your mind of what the possible conclusions might be. Were you surprised by what you had found when you had finished doing all the work and research? I understand about individual decisions on whether we went north and decisions on that, but does anything particularly stand out that you found and that you would like to share with the Committee?

Major General Elliott: I was astonished by how we got into a muddle over Basra. I am sorry to return to it, but I was genuinely astonished by how we went into Helmand. Those two things make me conclude that it was not working. I set out initially to find out whether the British Army and the Marines and everybody else had underperformed. It soon became clear that they had been the greatest credit to us that we could possibly have. They really did brilliantly.

Q348 Derek Twigg: But in terms of lessons learned, what are the key lessons learned? You started out with some ideas of what the book should look like. At the end of it, what lessons—

Major General Elliott: I had not realised that the CDS was so clearly identified as the person in charge, that his is a difficult job and that it would help him if he had more directed education towards that. He was more familiar with statecraft and how those sorts of things work, because they learn that on the job. That was the first thing. The second thing is that he needs to be supported by a caucus of people who can advise him on those issues, instead of—I am getting into slightly difficult things here, because of course they thought strategically, but it was not sufficient for the demands.

Q349 Mr Havard: May I just follow that up for a second? You were the Director of Military Operations, and then we had the Director of Capabilities. We used to have a way of seeing, there used to be architecture and structures to capture process or events and then learn from them and build them into the corporate history. We have expressed concerns on a number of occasions, as you know, that we do not necessarily feel that that is no longer being done as well as it could be, so that the military itself is not understanding what it did in the past and it cannot feed that back into the loop, whereas previously there was the understanding and the analysis there to give advice of this sort. We are identifying a problem here. We are trying to struggle to say something intelligent about what should therefore happen. It is not necessarily a case of rebuilding what you have, but clearly something needs to happen here to deal with this question. Do you have any observations about that?

Major General Elliott: If I may, I go back to what you said. I will deal with the Army rather than the other two services. The Army is a human organisation, but it is desperately self-analytical, always asking itself how it can do better and that sort of thing, but quite clearly there isn't a process that has been successful in lessons learned. There is evidence that we did not change enough in some aspects. We thought we knew Iraq, some people have said, because we had been in Northern Ireland, but if you read that book, "British Generals in Blair's War", and what some of the generals themselves had written about, they were astonishingly open-minded and trying to grapple with their problems—not all of them. General Richard Shirreff and General Jonathan Shaw, when they were confronted with the problem of Basra, came out with two diametrically opposite solutions, but they were certainly thinking very imaginatively and trying to work out how to find their way through it. So, yes, lessons learned, but I do not think that that is the real issue there actually.

Q350 Dr Lewis: You said you were astonished at the way we went into Helmand. As that is one of the cases that we are looking at in this inquiry, can you tell us briefly how you think that decision was made, and what was it that astonished you about it?

Major General Elliott: What astonished me was that we did not have enough troops for what the worst case might be, and we had not wound up a big enough reserve. That had a very bad effect, because it meant that when we came under pressure we used our heavy weapons to defend ourselves, which of course caused great problems for the civilian population who got caught inside.

Q351 Dr Lewis: But what did you conclude about the way in which the decision to go in was taken?

Major General Elliott: This is completely anecdotal. When the Helmand report team came back, they gave a very clear picture of what could happen, but it took a whole year for the decision to be made and the clarity of the original report got lost. We became concerned with our national policy of trying to get NATO to be successful, and that became the driving force. As people became reluctant to come forward, perhaps our military planning became secondary to making sure that NATO would do this operation—for very good reasons, but the two things were in conflict.

Dr Lewis: Thank you. I will enjoy reading the rest of your book.

Chair: General, thank you very much indeed for your time. This brings the public part of our evidence session to a close.