



Defence Committee

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

Tuesday 3 February 2015

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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; Derek Twigg; John Woodcock.

Questions 352-445

Witnesses: **Baroness Neville-Jones**, former member of the National Security Council, and **Lord Richards of Herstmonceux**, former Chief of the Defence Staff, gave evidence.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Baroness Neville-Jones**, former member of the National Security Council

Q352 **Chair:** The Committee is privileged to have in front of us the right hon. Baroness Neville-Jones, who is in a very good position to help us in what is the penultimate stage of our evidence. We are focusing today on decision making in defence. Baroness Neville-Jones is very well qualified to talk to us about this because she was the chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee. She was also very much involved in the thinking that went into the creation of the National Security Council, and she has a very distinguished record in public service, particularly in the Foreign Office from 1964 to 1996.

Baroness Neville-Jones, we have heard in Committee again and again that the solution to the problems that Britain has sometimes faced in terms of coming up with an energetic, strategic vision for the world lies in the NSC. Do you feel that the National Security Council, as currently constituted, solves all the problems that Britain needs to solve in terms of coming up with coherent strategy?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I suppose the answer to that question is, to some extent, that I don't think it is a perfect organisation. There are parts of the way in which it works at the moment that are a real improvement on what preceded it, while there are other parts in which more could be done of a helpful kind. You mentioned the word "strategic", and I think strategy is one of the areas where I would like to see rather more focus from the council.

Q353 **Chair:** Would you like to elaborate a bit more clearly on where the limitations, constraints or the bureaucratic obstacles are to making it a genuinely effective strategic body?

Baroness Neville-Jones: If I may, I will just say where I think the strengths are. Operationally, there are some real strengths. We have managed, as a result of instituting the council, to talk the language of national security, which we used not to. We used to talk about foreign policy and defence, and that disabled us from doing something—we did not link the external and internal aspects of security—which was one of the reasons why I advocated the creation of the council. When I heard the head of MI5 say that, in the run-up to the Iraq war, the Government had been warned that there was likely to be an increase in the terrorist threat to the country but nothing had been done about it, I concluded that there was something wrong with the machinery of government if that situation could arise. That was really what propelled me, more than any other single thing, into thinking that we really have to do something.

In addition to that, there are a number of other factors. If you look around the world, Heads of Government now effectively run external relations of their countries. It is the triumph of the presidential model. The Head of Government—the Prime Minister for us—becomes an increasingly important figure. He has to be across all the issues with things such as the G20. That was another reason for making sure that the Prime Minister was at the centre of it.

Thirdly, I felt that we needed to drive policy, not just co-ordinate it. I think that the National Security Council has, to some extent, driven policy. It has certainly enabled the agenda to be more orderly, relevant and timely. There is a dedicated secretariat, after all, to do that. The preparation is good because officials prepare beforehand, and that used not to be the case. When I was a deputy under-secretary in the Cabinet Office, my job was to brief the Prime Minister. I would gather deputy secretary officials around me for that purpose, but you could then have the meeting and the Secretary of State concerned—often the lead Department’s Secretary of State—would come along and say, “I don’t want any of this,” because what he sensed was borders on his policy turf, so we had to start changing that.

The last thing I would say is that unity of government, and the unity of pursuit of policy across the Government, have been greatly aided by the National Security Council. It is not perfect, and one of the reasons is money.

Finally, to answer your point about strategy, I think that is still the weakest point. I think that, to be frank, we British temperamentally are not particularly strategic. I don’t think it is one of our strengths. We are operational, intelligent and often quite well organised, but I don’t think we are particularly strategic. Perhaps some of the shortcomings in the operation of the NSC machinery reflect that. I think the secretariat is still underpowered in the sense of being overstretched. It has some very good people in it, but they are stretched beyond where they need to be. They do not have enough capacity to think or plan, and they do not have much capacity to lead planning.

One of the things that has not happened is actually in the SDSR. If you look at the SDSR carefully, there is a paragraph right at the end about having a network of planning staffs and outsiders led by the National Security Adviser. I do not believe that that has happened. I do not think that he has the bandwidth, because he not only runs the secretariat, but also acts as the Prime Minister’s emissary. He is stretched in many directions.

There are many reasons why we do not have a more strategic approach. The other thing I would say is that while I think the preparation of the agendas is good, I am less impressed by follow-up. There is meant to be something called the implementation board, led by the National Security Adviser. Things tend to get lost in the Departments. When Sir Kim Darroch came to testify to the Lords Committee that I am on, he rather indicated that he felt it was up to Departments to decide what came to the National Security Council. Personally, I would like to see more drive out of the NSC itself.

Q354 Richard Benyon: Lady Neville-Jones, you are an awfully long way away. I am sorry that this is an unfriendly room.

You have answered most of the questions that I was going to ask, but I wonder if we could dig a bit deeper into what you just said. If the British psyche is to have a sort of congenital indisposition to being strategic—if that is not mangling my syntax—how can we create a mechanism that would correct that and allow us to make better decisions on security and defence issues?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I think that creating a planning network and involving some outsiders would be a good thing to do. I was, at one point in my time at the Foreign Office, the head of the policy planning staff. The policy planning staff actually performed quite an important function inside that Department. It was very close to the Secretary of State. It wrote most of his speeches and acted as a department that was commissioned with long-term thinking and got some very hard problems to solve. It usually got problems that the operationally relevant Department did not have time for or could not intellectually tackle. It was our job to do that.

There needs to be some machinery of that kind in the National Security Council set-up. I do not wish to see what I think is a danger in the American system, where the National Security Council almost displaces departments. I do not think that there is any danger of this at the moment, but I do not want to see the NSC displace a Department or for a Department to cease to think. What I would like to see is collaboration between Departments, which ought to have a policy planning cell at the very least, and them linking up together. Network thinking and some challenge from outside would stimulate the intellectual juices. It is a process of discussion which allows people to identify what they are doing well, what they are not doing well and what more they ought to be doing.

Q355 Richard Benyon: If the NSC was the concept that you were very much advocating before this Government were formed, where do you think it is in terms of what you would like to see? You could give us a broad-brush, percentage answer, or you could go into a little more detail about where you think it is lacking.

Baroness Neville-Jones: I think that it is about 70% or 75% good on operational. It is more like 30% to 40% good on strategic.

Q356 Richard Benyon: Do you think that some of that comes down to the pure mechanics? You talked about the secretariat, but also how the meetings are structured and the time factor. That may create longer discussions about certain elements while other bits are squeezed out, which could have profound effects.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes. I think you make a good point. We have had troops in the field for almost the entire lifetime of this Government. We are only just leaving the combat role in Afghanistan now. That does mean—and it is, in my view, absolutely proper—that the NSC agenda should be very heavily loaded with that concern. I have heard the criticism, “Well, it’s too operational. We spend too much time on day-to-day things,” and so on. I believe that if you have men in the field, it is an absolute duty to be following that situation very closely. In addition to that, it is true to say that quite a lot of the work that was being done had to do with winning the peace, rather than simply being concerned with combat operations. That has, however, put quite a load on the energies of the secretariat members, the Ministers themselves and the Prime Minister in particular. I hope that the Prime Minister won’t mind me saying this, but I don’t think he is particularly strategic. I think he is highly operational and that he thinks. “Strategy is what we’re going to do next.” So, personalities do come into it.

Q357 Richard Benyon: Can you think of an example of a decision that was taken before the NSC’s creation that would have been different if we had had an NSC then, or is that an impossible question?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Almost impossible, yes. I can give you one or two things that I think were great successes for the NSC that I think would have had less of a chance in its absence. A safe and secure Olympics was one of them. There was a tremendous amount of genuine organisation around an absolutely clearly focused priority that led to a whole series of actions that needed to be undertaken, where Ministers themselves were involved in exercising, and where the whole of the Government machine, in the end, was deployed on this. I think that would have been quite hard to do in the absence of something as central and important in people’s minds, because it does loom large in the minds of officials. This has formed a focus for official thinking, so I would cite that.

Q358 Mr Havard: You said that when we have people in combat activity in the field, it has a particular emphasis—that is right. Are you suggesting that this becomes a War Cabinet when that is happening? What is the relationship between the NSC and Cabinet Government? Is it a replacement for it at some times and not others? What is that relationship?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I think that the institution of the NSC probably means that, in any future combat, you would not need a War Cabinet in that sense, because those who would compose the War Cabinet are indeed members of the NSC. Final decisions rest with the Cabinet. It is certainly the case, in my experience, that discussion will have taken place in the Cabinet on certain issues, particularly if there is a decision to be taken, and there will be further discussion subsequently in the NSC, but the NSC has not replaced, and should not displace, the Cabinet.

Q359 Mr Havard: It is formally a sub-Committee, isn’t it?

Baroness Neville-Jones: It is a sub-Committee. It is a Cabinet Committee. It is a rather super-Cabinet Committee, but it is a Cabinet Committee—you are quite right.

Q360 Mr Havard: Does it challenge that relationship of Cabinet Government? Does Cabinet Government get subsumed by the NSC?

Baroness Neville-Jones: No, I do not think so; I would suggest not. What it does is to serve Cabinet Government rather better. There is one other thing that I would say about it. Having been the deputy secretary who took the Cabinet note on foreign affairs for a time, one thing that was striking about it was that there were very few people round the table who had had the papers, so they were very much the recipients of the wisdom of those who would know, who were centrally involved. I think that that is liable always to be the case in Cabinet. It does mean, however, that much more solid work of a detailed kind goes on among a wider group of Ministers now in the National Security Council than would have been the case in any traditional Cabinet Committee.

Q361 John Woodcock: This follows on from what you have just been saying; again, it might be a difficult question to answer. If you are not on the NSC or connected to it as closely as you are, how do we measure its success? What are the criteria that we ought to be looking at?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I suppose that the permanent membership of the National Security Council is quite broad. It includes things such as the Energy Minister, so it is broader than traditional foreign policy and defence. If your Department has a policy paper coming up, or if another Department has a policy paper coming up that impinges on yours, you should be invited as an affected Minister, and in my experience that does happen. Care is taken, and the NSC officials will have identified the need for that. In my experience, at any rate—I was there for a year—I don't think we took decisions that affected another member of the Government in their absence and in their ignorance. Minutes are circulated too, of course.

Q362 John Woodcock: Sure. You mentioned the London 2012 preparations as an example of success, but the example you have just given, in and of itself, is a process—a structural thing. Can you point to actual defined outputs that were better, other than Ministers not getting quite as cross and feeling like mushrooms, as they usually do?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I do actually think that there are examples—I have given one, but I could give you others—of a higher-grade outcome for a long-term process than would otherwise have been the case. The cyber-security strategy is a very good, prominent example of money allocated in the context of the national security strategy, having been identified as a national security priority, with the policy then pursued and implemented with considerable determination across Government from the Cabinet Office. Would that have happened in the absence of the NSC and the national security strategy? I rather doubt it.

Q363 John Woodcock: Yet the chaos and disorder in the aftermath of Libya is surely an example of the NSC and an over-operational Prime Minister being ineffective.

Baroness Neville-Jones: I said earlier that I was less impressed by the follow-up than by the preparation for meetings, which certainly is the case. Obviously, one of the hardest things about intervention is what happens after the immediate initial military operation: when and how do you disengage, and what are the consequences thereof? I would say that this is extremely difficult policy making, and we certainly need a greater focus on it. I wouldn't try to say that this was a great success, but I would say that it is very hard and, because it is very hard, you need to focus on it. What we need are more sub-committees that are concerned with follow-up, that report into the central machinery and that have the

job of watching what is going on and alerting people to serious developments, or to the potential of serious developments.

Q364 John Woodcock: Is Libya an example of where a more strategic Prime Minister could have looked—and should have been able to look—further ahead to see what was coming and imposed leadership on the system?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Irrespective of whether the Prime Minister personally is strategic, the machine ought to be able to do that.

Q365 John Woodcock: Does not the way in which the machinery is constructed mean that it is not sufficiently able to do that? When you have a Prime Minister who, as you describe him, is operational rather than strategic, it cannot do that, because it is too dependent on and centred around him or her.

Baroness Neville-Jones: By definition, it has to be centred around him, given that he is the chairman thereof. However, the capabilities, and indeed the staffing, of the NSC need thickening up. It does need more capability.

Q366 Ms Stuart: I am trying to get my head around this. Cyber-security works well, but so did the planning for the millennium bug, which worked well because every Department across Whitehall knows that, if anything goes wrong, it will land on their desk—it is unavoidable, and they can't pass it on. The Olympics worked because they were so defined. We knew when they were going to start, and everybody knew their head was on the block. I am trying to get at what happens when you have a structure that doesn't have such a specific object or something that everyone will have to deal with if it goes wrong—you talked about the deployment of troops. Then you have a guy at the centre of this who is British, and therefore genetically tending not to be terribly strategic, who brings his own gene pool to it. You cannot have a machinery that overcomes that absence if the guy or the woman at the top is not prepared to engage in that kind of thinking. Is there any success, whether in Libya or in any other deployment, where we can really say that strategic forward thinking went on and we implemented it? Is there any example?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Part of the problem with this is that in effect, we are talking about the crises that didn't happen. That does not mean that there was no potential for them; the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence. I would say that the counter-terrorism strategy, and the fact that with the exception of one notable attack, we have managed to protect ourselves, is an example of extremely good leadership, a focus on the objective, undoubtedly very hard work and the allocation of resources. You cannot do that without the Prime Minister.

It is not fair to say that the machine cannot work. What I am saying is that I think the machine can help Ministers. We are all built differently. I do not accept the notion that because the Prime Minister is not particularly personally strategic, the machine cannot help him or her be more strategic. As I said, I think that the NSC secretariat needs greater strengthening in that area. That is really all I am saying. Cyber-security strategy does not have a finite date or end. It is something that needs to be pursued, which people are quite clear about, but one problem is how we know what is good in that area.

Q367 Ms Stuart: Let us come back to Libya. Given that Libya has clearly fallen apart and may cause us even more problems, where is the evidence? Certainly, at Foreign Office questions or defence questions, despite our best attempts, we are saying “It’s something for the UN.” How can we find out if anybody at that level is doing any strategic thinking about what we are doing there?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I cannot answer that question, because I do not know. I would be very surprised if it were not still the object of assessment and examination. It certainly will be in the JIC. The information process will be going on.

Q368 Chair: This is a problem for the Committee, and indeed the public, in trying to understand the NSC, because to use a jargon phrase, it is very non-transparent to us. Is it your sense that there will be an energetic group of people focused hard on strategy towards Libya at the moment, or that a couple of desk officers will peer at it from time to time and a few reports will come? It is very difficult for us to assess.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Chairman, I don’t know the answer to that question. I am outside Government, so I don’t know. If you ask me which of those alternatives I think is likely to be the case, I would say that it is going to be the lesser rather than the greater.

Q369 Mrs Moon: I would like to get some idea of the quality of discussions and presentations. What is your assessment of the quality of the policy advice that is given, and can you give us some example of good and bad practices there? We are struggling to get a sense of what actually happens and how effective it is.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Some items on the agenda will come up simply for oral discussion, but the majority of items will come up with a paper. That paper will have been authored in a lead Department, and it will have gone through the collected officials who mirror the NSC itself. Their job will have been—apart from judging the good sense of what is being advised—to try to ensure that the paper pointed the NSC at the questions that needed a decision.

The quality of the paperwork that I saw was high. It served a purpose, and the papers were, on the whole, pretty well prepared and pretty well written. That is not to say that it was always perfect. Sometimes you found that an angle had not been taken account of. That does mean that the NSC can get through quite a lot of business in an hour, because it does not last for more than an hour. On the whole, it is quite efficient.

Is there discussion around the table? Most certainly. The lead Minister will start the discussion. Others will come in as they want to or feel the need to, and then the Prime Minister sums up. The object of the exercise is to ensure that if decisions are needed, they are taken. Then it is remitted for follow-up.

Q370 Mrs Moon: And good or bad practices? Can you give us examples of the things that they do that are really good, or not so good?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I am a bit reserved about taking a theoretical example of something that has not been well done. I cannot immediately think of something that was not particularly orderly. It is clear from the record that not all policies were as well pursued as others. The Committee has mentioned Libya, not surprisingly, several times.

Clearly, things were not done in relation to Libya that we would like to have seen done. I agree with that.

Q371 Mrs Moon: You talked about the presentation of papers that were there to help guide the committee towards the decisions that they needed to make, to inform them before making the decisions. Where did those papers come from? Were they always from within Ministries? Would they go outside to academic experts? How wide was the thinking that was provided to Ministers before making a decision? How much innovation is allowed in policy decisions, rather than the information guiding you to the inevitable decision?

Baroness Neville-Jones: On your process question, the papers started in Departments. Sometimes it is the Department on its own and sometimes it is a Department in collaboration with another Department, depending on the subject. How much external influence is exerted from people outside? In so far as a Department is open to discussion with outside influences, there will be some influence from outside. Do they actually externally consult on papers that they are writing? I rather doubt it. Do I want to see the system opened up more? Yes. I always have. This is where Ministers obviously count.

An enterprising Minister will want to see a good paper—it may contain some new ideas. This is not just a machine; it is composed of human beings. And the quality of the leadership in Departments does matter when it comes to how imaginative and how wide-ranging the recommendations are. I think we seldom saw a paper that we thought barely met the remit. It was always very good to see a paper that went well beyond what you had hoped you might see.

Q372 Mrs Moon: When you started, you described how you used to be in No. 10 and you would have all these people come together to give briefings, and then the Minister would come in and say, “I don’t want any of that, because my Department thinks this, and my officials are saying that this is the way we should go.” I do not get a sense of what is different if what you have got is the Department writing the paper, which, let us face it, is bound. Okay, we can idealise the Minister who is wide ranging, creative and innovative, but the reality is usually that it is a case of follow the money—“It is my budget, my power, my policy area, and this is therefore my focus.” So what has changed that stops it from being so orientated towards the departmental view?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I have not been clear in what I have said. Under the previous system, the preparation for meetings of Cabinet Committees was done at deputy secretary level, not permanent secretary level. The briefing that went to the Prime Minister on what was likely to happen at the meeting and the outcome that he should either expect or go for—or both—would have been based on that discussion.

What in my experience could happen—it did not happen every time, but it could and it did—was that when officials got back to their Departments, and it was often the lead Department where this happened, the permanent secretary said, “I’m not having any of this. I know that the Minister won’t like this. We’re not going to be able to agree to this recommendation.” So when the Cabinet Committee came into being, the Prime Minister found himself with a situation that had not been predicted—and, potentially, an awkward confrontation.

The difference with this system is that meetings of the NSC are prepared by permanent secretaries. The permanent secretaries are therefore, in effect, committing their Departments and if they need to go to talk to their Minister, then they need to go to talk to their Minister. There is much less likelihood, therefore, of the preparation for the NSC being overturned by a Minister who finds that he does not actually agree with what had been prepared in his name. That is a very big difference. It also means, actually, that the permanent secretaries have to go on arguing with each other until they do come to some kind of agreement, because it will not come on to the agenda until they have and it needs to get on to the agenda. It acts as a forcing process in Whitehall to get agreement on things.

Q373 Mrs Moon: I still see a bias from what you are saying in that the advice being prepared for the decision makers has a departmental focus. Albeit the Sir Humphreys get together and argue about it, it still comes from the Department's perspective rather than the considered overview that you could get—the American Government get it—if papers came in from outside.

Baroness Neville-Jones: It is certainly the case that the paper will have been written—certainly the first version—in the Department. By the time that it has been through the collected permanent secretaries, however, it may have been modified. They will feel free to redraft. So it does not follow that it will always be just the Department and the Department despite others; it has to be the Department with the agreement of others.

Q374 Mrs Moon: My concern is that it is still within the often oxygen-free zone of Whitehall and its Departments. It is not going outside, as the Americans do, to say to experts in that area of policy or Government in academia, think-tanks and wherever, “What is your view?” The Government is still thinking within Government bounds, but sometimes it has to go outside.

Baroness Neville-Jones: I think we agree on that. It is not easy for outsiders to influence particular papers for an agenda. I do think it is important that outsiders should be in the thinking process that surrounds the NSC.

Q375 Mr Gray: May we move on from how to what is being discussed? I am sorry about this, but I took the opportunity to dig out the paper that you and I wrote together—I seem to recall the process was that you wrote it and I signed up to it—where we were talking about the NSC. The whole thrust of the paper was that the NSC would be a strategic thinking body. “The primary function...of an NSC would be much more strategic.” It would be “a permanent forum for long range strategic policy formulation” so on and so forth.

With that as the background, the impression that I had from your earlier remarks is that it has been very good operationally and tactically—it did very well in the Olympics and in delivering boots on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq—but it has not achieved anything strategically. First, I hope I am right in thinking that that is the general tenor of your evidence.

Baroness Neville-Jones: I certainly would say without equivocation that the NSC needs to be more strategic; I would not say that it has not achieved anything strategic and that it is entirely tactical. The cyber-security strategy is an example of something that is, without question, strategic.

There have been some changes in the process of government. You may consider this a trivial point, but I think that the way in which science and innovation are being used in security policy is a major step forward. There has been a White Paper as a result of the NSC. Similarly, the identification of the prosperity agenda, alongside the national security agenda, has led to things such as the growth partnership and the upgrading of UKTI.

You may argue that there is a long way to go, but those are real, substantive changes in the functioning of Government that are designed to achieve long-term outcomes. They don't have immediate effects, but they should have long-term results. It is too easy to say that it doesn't have any effect at all. I am saying that, on policy issues, it could, with advantage, still have a greater strategic focus.

Q376 Mr Gray: Sure thing. In the context of defence, I presume that you would agree that the NSS had no role to play at all on the previous SDSR. It came into being on the same day that the SDSR was announced, so presumably it was not involved.

Baroness Neville-Jones: They were written in conjunction. There was a failure to discuss the changes in defence and defence equipment in a way that the National Security Council could understand. There was a session at which it was discussed, so there is no argument about that. However, with the exception of a few people around the table, the Ministers concerned were not sufficiently versed to understand what was being said to them, so it was a very unsatisfactory discussion. You could say that there was a disjuncture, therefore, between the defence section of the SDSR and the NSC. I take the view that Army 2020 should certainly have been discussed by the NSC, and it appears not to have been.

Q377 Mr Gray: It appears not to have been.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes. But I think that the security side of the SDSR reflected a lot of work that had been done in the context of the NSC. It was being written by the same people, including me.

Q378 Mr Gray: What should the NSC's job be in the context of the next SDSR? What job does the NSC have? Let us assume that there is an SDSR straight after the election this year, or one early next year. What role does the NSC have?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I think it should have a framework discussion about what it wants the SDSR to do and about what priorities it should set itself. The SDSR should be about capabilities. It is a ways and means document, and it should take as its goals the priorities that have been set by an NSC discussion. It should then ensure that the capabilities and policies are there to implement those goals. Without doubt, there needs to be a lead from the NSC. What's more, the SDSR should come back to the NSC before it is published.

Q379 Mr Gray: If that were to happen, the NSC would have to occur months, at least, before the SDSR did its work, would it not?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes. We have all been in government long enough to know that officials do a great deal of preparation beforehand, which is needed. However, when a Government come into operation, they have to do a great deal of really important work extremely quickly. There is no doubt about that. Unless the Departments concerned are

prepared to see their financial options curtailed by CSR, they need to get their work in first. So that puts a time limit on the writing of those two documents.

Q380 Mr Gray: It does indeed. Last time round, the CSR, the NSS and the SDSR were all published, at least, on the same day. Am I right in thinking that what you are saying very much chimes with my own view, which is that the national security strategy should lay out who we are as a nation, what we are for, what we intend to do and how we are going to do it, and that, some time later, the SDSR would then carry that out? That is a reasonable process.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes. In order to be able to put that on to paper, however, it is fairly clear that work has to go on among the officials before the Government take office. Ministers then have to have a very rapid discussion and the documents then have to take shape on the basis of that discussion.

Q381 Mr Gray: Let me ask you one final detailed question. To what degree do you think that the National Security Council should be the organisation that decides something like the scrapping of the Harriers or of the maritime patrol aircraft, or the capabilities of the aircraft carriers? Are those the kinds of detailed decisions that the NSC should be carrying out or are they delegated matters for the MOD?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I would not describe them as detailed; I would describe them as really quite important. Those decisions were taken on the NSC. The point I was making is that the NSC and the membership that took them were not tremendously well equipped to take those decisions and did not really understand their full implications.

What is more, I think it was fairly apparent. After all, these decisions were being taken in the context of a big black void in the MOD budget and indeed a national deficit as well. Therefore, not all of them were expected. The advice that Ministers were getting betrayed differences of opinion between the chiefs. They were all there, I might say.

Mr Gray: I very much enjoyed the production of this document. It must be of huge satisfaction to you personally to know that your ideas are the things that are carried out in Government. There can be very few occasions on which that occurs.

Q382 Derek Twigg: I am just coming from what James has said. We know that you were responsible for much of the preparatory work in opposition on the design of the National Security Council. When you were doing that work, did you take account of the fact that we might have a Prime Minister who was not strategic?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I already knew who the leader of my party was, at any rate, although it wasn't necessarily going to be a Conservative victory. I knew, yes.

Q383 Derek Twigg: What was the mitigation put in place to deal with that?

Baroness Neville-Jones: What I proposed—and if you look at the writing we did in opposition, it is reflected in official papers—

Q384 Derek Twigg: What did it say?

Baroness Neville-Jones: James Gray just cited what we said about it being strategic. What I wanted to do was to—

Q385 Derek Twigg: Sorry to interrupt you, but my question is that you could have a Prime Minister—and it could be any Prime Minister, not necessarily this Prime Minister—who is not strategic. He could be trained to be strategic, but that is another issue. What is the mitigation for having a leader of this body without a strategic mind?

Baroness Neville-Jones: My intended mitigation was that the National Security Council secretariat should itself have sufficient resources and manpower to be able to lead planning and strategic thinking, and form the centre of a network in Whitehall. If you look at the very end of the 2010 SDSR paper itself, you will find that that is a commitment that they make. However, I do not think it has happened.

Q386 Derek Twigg: So is it down to the civil service to provide the strategic leadership.

Baroness Neville-Jones: The civil service works with the resources it is given.

Q387 Derek Twigg: Let us just have a quick look on that basis. This is where I am wondering whether there is a perfect storm. You are talking about the Prime Minister. In General David Richards's book, *Taking Command*—we will question him next—he is talking about the Council. Let me just read a relevant passage. He says he greatly supports it “in principle”. He goes on: “My frustration with it, which was evident throughout our discussions on Afghanistan and the conduct of the war in Libya, was that it tended to focus on the near-term and the tactical as opposed to the big foreign policy and grand strategic issues.”

It is not only the Prime Minister who has a problem, but the Council. You just said that the Council is safeguarding to stop these sorts of things happening, and actually we hear from the head of the armed forces at the time that that was not the case.

Baroness Neville-Jones: I suppose the advisers are there to help the Council to be more strategic—

Derek Twigg: But they didn't.

Baroness Neville-Jones: You come back in the end, Chair, to the fact that personalities count. They do. I am not trying to argue against that. I also think that it is quite hard when you are in the middle of combat to be thinking very strategically, although that is not an excuse—

Derek Twigg: But the Prime Minister was not in the middle of combat.

Baroness Neville-Jones:—for not doing that strategic work. I am not really arguing with you about it. It is a short cut.

Q388 Derek Twigg: So you accept that there is a major flaw there. Given all that, how is Parliament assured that we can have trust in the making of good decisions? Take account of just some of the decisions that the NSC has been involved in—John made a point earlier about Libya; there are also the carrier decisions and the failure to persuade Parliament about Syria. There is an argument, if you read Lord Richards's book about the tactics and strategy of what we should have been doing—major failures of the Council. The question to you is, how can Parliament and the people trust the work of the NSC given its record so far? Is it not just a structural problem, but a problem with how it was formed in the first place?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I would say that, for all that there have been some failures, there have been a number of successes, although they, of course, are not the ones that you pick out as being the flowers in the field. One tends to notice the failures.

Q389 Derek Twigg: I understand, but part of the remit for doing this was to stop the “sofa-style government” of a previous Prime Minister and to have things done in a more structured way. I put it to you that that structure might in principle be fine, but it is not actually working, is it?

Baroness Neville-Jones: I think it is working a very great deal better than the decision-making system that prevailed during the Iraq war.

Derek Twigg: There is no evidence for that.

Q390 Chair: May I take up Derek’s point briefly, before I move on to Dr Julian Lewis? One possible understanding of the model—I don’t know whether this is right or wrong—is that you set up the National Security Council, which creates a theoretically much more orderly process, but in the end the sofa government is still sitting there in the same way.

For example, it might be the case in relation to Iraq at the moment that the National Security Council could prepare a whole series of papers, everyone could sit around and come up with cunning plans for what we were going to do in Iraq and the Ministry of Defence might recommend that 200 soldiers are deployed into Iraq to provide counter-IED training to the Iraqi forces—but it gets to the Prime Minister, who just says, “No, I am not going to have any troops on the ground in Iraq, because an election is coming and I do not want to take risks of that sort”, and that effectively short-circuits the whole system. Is that right? Is that inevitable?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Were that to happen, you could argue, yes, that it short-circuits the whole system. I would be surprised if the Prime Minister were to take that decision without any consultation with any of his colleagues. Would he take it to the National Security Council? He would certainly report it to the National Security Council if he decided to do that, but I think he would do that only in the absence of a National Security Council decision if he was pretty confident of where his other colleagues stood.

Q391 Chair: We are working our way towards this because we have just completed a report on Iraq. Our sense, or our best guess of what happens, is that it indeed goes in front of the National Security Council, but the NSC only has an hour, it is probably dealing with two or three issues and not just one, the proposal is presented, there is a discussion for 20 or 25 minutes, the Prime Minister puts his foot down and says, “I don’t think we’re ready to take any risks or have any troops killed in Iraq”, and the conversation ends.

Instead of a free-flowing, rich strategic discussion where defence intellectuals are energetically engaged in all the different possibilities on the ground in Iraq, what you have is a relatively brief decision ultimately made by someone who is not a specialist in the area and does not have a great deal of time to make that decision.

Baroness Neville-Jones: If that has happened, I would not dispute your characterisation of it, but I do not think that that constitutes sofa government. It has not been done in private and there is a record of it.

Q392 Chair: Is there any way around that problem? Is there any solution to the problem that I have just described? Is there any way of imagining a better system, or is that just inevitable?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Government is hard and government is always pressurised. You will get situations like that. I think that preparation for these meetings and briefing the Prime Minister beforehand are very important. I have never witnessed the briefing of this Prime Minister, but I would certainly regard that particular bit of the job, which lies with the National Security Adviser, as being extremely important. The Prime Minister should have had the arguments rehearsed to him on an issue like that, before he got in the room.

Q393 Dr Lewis: General Richards, from whom we are taking evidence after you, has said on more than one occasion that there seems to be no central focus as to where strategy is determined in our system. I assume that the creation of the NSC was an attempt to fill that gap. Is that a correct assumption?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes.

Q394 Dr Lewis: And to what extent has that gap been filled by the NSC?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Everything I have said, I think, indicates that I reckon that it has been filled pretty imperfectly.

Q395 Dr Lewis: Pretty imperfectly?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes. It is not totally absent, but pretty imperfectly.

Q396 Dr Lewis: So could we try to concentrate on the areas where these imperfections might be rectified? Would it be true to say that, in formulating strategy, some sort of balance or equilibrium must be reached between the influence of the civil servants and the input of—if we are talking about military strategy—the military and the contributions and ultimate responsibility of the politicians? There are those three elements, aren't there?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes.

Dr Lewis: So what I want to ask you is: from your experience of the functioning of the NSC, to what extent has there been an appropriate balance from those three sources in the operations of the NSC?

I particularly have in mind your earlier answer, which was very interesting: you said that before anything would appear even on the agenda of the NSC, the permanent secretaries of the various Departments will have got together and pretty much reached agreement on the issue concerned, unless I misunderstood you. That would suggest that there is a considerable input from the civil servants, and there is clearly some input from the politicians. Do you think that the input from the military—we are talking about military strategy here—matches up to that of the other two sources?

Baroness Neville-Jones: If I might revert for a moment to the civil servants—the permanent secretaries will have got together and decided what the agenda is for decision. They will not necessarily all agree on what that decision should be. I am talking about the need for something other than that and in addition to that; that is to say, something that would be led by the National Security Council's secretariat identifying issues that had long-term strategic implications, and commissioning work on them, not necessary all to be

done in house but to be done by other Departments in Whitehall and outside. That is what I would like to see. I would like to see the National Security Council have more away days than it does and take some of the longer-term issues. That seems to be one of the pieces of the thing that is missing.

As to who contributes what, I would say that the preponderance of the “thinking” lies with the civil service. Ministers are busy. Unless given time and space to think rather longer—that is why I think a Chequers away day is a good thing to have—and to focus on things that are not part of the current agenda, they will not do so. They will want to take the decision on the agenda.

As for the military advice, clearly it depends on the opportunities that the military is given to give that advice. On the whole, one of the questions that I have been asked is whether I think that just having the CDS there is enough. The answer to that is probably yes, in general terms, unless you are discussing something that has to do with the Ministry of Defence and its own workings and capability, in which case, as with the unsatisfactory SDSR discussion, they were all there. The Prime Minister very much relies on the CDS of the day.

Q397 Dr Lewis: Can I come in at that point? Let us assume for the sake of argument that we are talking here about issues affecting a military campaign at the strategic level. It seems to me that the sole voice of the CDS—albeit that he is the absolute supremo in uniform—on this committee, if the topic under discussion is meant to be whether and how a campaign should be undertaken, is somewhat likely to be overborne by the contributions of the civil servants and the politicians.

Baroness Neville-Jones: That is not the way, if I might say so, that it actually works in practice. The civil servants whom you have in the room are the heads of the agencies and the CDS, and otherwise it is Ministers, other than the National Security Adviser. You do not have an enormous array of civil servants around.

I think actually it would be a good idea, more often than turns out to be the case, to have an official from a relevant Department if it is not a military matter. Those in attendance, in my experience, have usually been invited to speak first by the Prime Minister and they do have the ability to get their oar in. Of course it is the case that they cannot frame the discussion.

I sense from what you are saying, and General Richards can speak for himself, that it did not feel as though the frame of discussion was one that led to the raising of the issues that he would like to have seen put on the table. The CDS, of course, does have access to the Prime Minister outside the NSC.

Q398 Dr Lewis: Yes, but we are talking about whether or not this particular committee is the focus for debate, the centre for decision making and the place where after a decision has been made and the consequences of it have been seen, society can go back to in terms of accountability and say, for example, “Well, we took this decision, we expanded our campaign into Afghanistan very greatly. Who is responsible for this and where was this decision taken?” Is it likely that the answer to such a question would be the NSC?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes, I think it would be, and what is more, there will be the minutes. I do not know how much you would find out about the decision taken about Helmand, for instance. These decisions are recorded properly, so you would know where the locus of decision making lay. Could I just say, in follow-up to what you have just said, that a lot of the following of a campaign would take place in a sub-committee meeting? It would not all be in the NSC itself. It would be more with the relevant Ministers, and in that context there would be almost certainly a higher military component.

Q399 Dr Lewis: As you have raised that, I am now going to put a final two points. In terms of sub-committees, do you think that it would strengthen the work of the NSC if there were a military sub-committee as part of its sub-structure?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes.

Q400 Dr Lewis: Thank you. Finally, I want you to go back to what you have said several times, which chimes in with something in a paper given to us by one of our advisers about the secretariat. He felt that today both the Chiefs of Staff and the NSC themselves are weak in this respect. He said, and I quote: “Both lack strong secretariats that can both integrate vertically the defence and security functions within Departments and, as importantly, horizontally across Whitehall and, more widely still, to reach out to key allies and NATO.” If the NSC is to be the responsible focus where strategic issues are debated and decided, and which can be held accountable afterwards, how would you envisage a stronger secretariat? In addition to the military sub-committee that you have just confirmed you would like to see, how would you see such a supporting apparatus being constructed?

Baroness Neville-Jones: One of the things that I said I am not confident about is the strength of the implementation board, which the National Security Adviser is meant to chair. It seems to me that that is precisely the place where you need integration of representation of Departments, and where the issues are very much cross-departmental. That will almost certainly be the case in any kind of campaign, where the whole business of winning the peace comes very early. That is where I would like to see a strengthening of follow-up. I would also like to see that backed by a greater capacity inside the NSC secretariat to think long term, and to lead long-term thinking.

I am less confident that I would like to see the NSC starting to displace the MOD and the FCO when it comes to linking with the allies and doing all those things. These are proper departmental functions, and you need to spread the decisions taken in the NSC out of the NSC and back into the rest of Government. It is very important that it does not become a powerhouse in its own right that begins to exclude the rest of Whitehall. That is one of the dangers of the American model that I would not like to see us replicate.

Dr Lewis: Thank you for such clear answers.

Q401 Chair: We are expecting a vote at 3.32 pm, which will interrupt proceedings briefly. Rather than starting with Lord Richards with four minutes to go, we will start with him after the vote. We will use the last three or four minutes we have before the Division bell rings with you, Baroness Neville-Jones.

As an outsider, there is something that seems a little bit bizarre about the NSC. Maybe you can help me try to understand it. When I went in to talk to the NSC about Afghanistan, I

found that I was looking at a very different body of people from those I would have dealt with in the United States. If you were going to talk about Afghanistan in the American system, you would find yourself sitting around a table with the CENTCOM commander, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, the ISAF commander, the Secretary of State, the Defence Secretary, Ambassador Holbrooke as a super-envoy, the President's chief of staff or deputy chief of staff, and maybe a defence policy expert. You have a conversation with a group of people, all of whom have either been on the ground in Afghanistan for a year or two or have visited the country many dozens of times and are able to talk fluently about the provinces and understand the policy over the last six or seven years.

When I went to the National Security Council, I found myself looking at the heads of the agencies, the Secretary of State for Energy, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the Chancellor and various other politicians who, if they had visited Afghanistan at all, had maybe visited it two or three times and knew very little about it. They sat there, presumably intelligently focusing on trying to hear what was said. Their capacity to derive from that conversation anything equivalent to what the American system could derive seems very limited. What is going on here? Why do we think that a sensible way of discussing strategy in Afghanistan is the latter, British model, as opposed to what I described in the American model, where you have highly informed and highly articulate specialists in the field?

Baroness Neville-Jones: If you had done that in the States, I would envisage that you were sitting in the Pentagon.

Chair: Actually it was in the State Department in that case, but with all the Pentagon people around the table.

Baroness Neville-Jones: The American NSC, when it meets in full form, is much more like the NSC in London. It has a very large number of Cabinet members in it. The US Cabinet system does not operate very much. It obviously operates much more as an advisory body to the President. You are quite right to say that it is a vast machine compared with ours. They are out on the ground and they are articulate. There are real differences between the American Government and our own.

Q402 Chair: But it is not simply about resources. It is specifically that the American system would suggest that the conversation should involve, in that case, three three-star generals and specifically the senior people in the NSC, the State Department and the Pentagon, but not any of these other people if you are talking about Afghan policy.

Baroness Neville-Jones: One cannot entirely replicate the NSC structure in a Government where it is Crown and Parliament, and you have accountabilities on the part of the Secretary of State to Committees such as this and so on. You have a different system of responsibility. That system of responsibility has to be reflected in who takes the decisions. I do not see how I get around that. I think that the NSC itself has to be composed of Ministers accountable to Parliament, but I do accept that there ought to be more flexibility; I come back to what I was saying about how you compose your follow-up and your day-to-day monitoring of policy. It would have been more fruitful for you to have had a different group of people, clearly—people who were more closely concerned with day-to-day activity in Afghanistan. It would have been a different lot of people, not the formal NSC.

Q403 **Ms Stuart:** Is it not also a function of size and power and the ability to protect power?

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes, sure.

Q404 **Ms Stuart:** The United States can decide what it does, whereas we increasingly decide what we do with our allies.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Well, increasingly we are takers rather than makers. It is certainly so. Nevertheless, we do have some scope to take real decisions that genuinely change events.

Q405 **Ms Stuart:** Then, of course, there is another level, where we have to act with others, which the NSC, in a sense, does not take into account. Where is the link to the EU? Where is the link to the UN? The answer by Ministers to Libya is, “The UN will take the lead, and we will see what they have to say.” That may be all they are doing. Are we trying to create a structure which, given our size and capacity, is not actually appropriate for our ability to act any more?

Baroness Neville-Jones: It is very interesting that since the UK created an NSC, quite a lot of other countries of a similar size have followed. I think that we all feel the need to integrate the new threats and needed to talk about some of the vulnerabilities that we all face. The shape of security and the shape of the issues it throws up has changed, and you need a much more integrated approach to the government, so I do not think it is a bit surprising that you need a different body. How much profile and prominence you give it, of course, is a matter of national choice.

Chair: Baroness Neville-Jones, thank you very much for coming.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Lord Richards of Herstmonceux**, former Chief of the Defence Staff, gave evidence.

Q406 **Chair:** The Committee is privileged to have with us again—General Lord Richards has come before us a number of times—a very good witness given the nature of our current inquiry. General Richards was a member of the National Security Council week in, week out for a long time, and is therefore in a very good position to help us to understand a little bit about the authorities, responsibilities, structures and activities of the NSC. Before I hand over to Derek Twigg, Lord Richards, you heard a little bit of what was going on beforehand. Can you give us your reflections on what you heard and where you agree or disagree with the Baroness?

Lord Richards: Yes. Thank you; it is good to be here in front of you again. I actually found myself agreeing with much of what she said. In essence, I think the NSC is better than what went before, but it has a long way to go, which is what she was essentially saying.

I did not quite agree with her on the relative influence of military men, civil servants and politicians, which I think is why you are asking the question, but we should be quite clear that I came away from my three years as Chief of the Defence Staff with the certain

knowledge that if you want to make a real difference, you must ultimately be a very senior Cabinet member in Government. It didn't matter how powerful or good a point one had. Ultimately—and rightly; I am a great fan of Eliot Cohen's book *Supreme Command*, which looks at the relationship between people like Alanbrooke and Churchill, Grant and Lincoln and so on—that is what a democracy forces on us.

The key issue for me is where we can improve what is not a bad theory, and some of you were getting at that in your questions. The role of the National Security Adviser and the absence of military men within the NSC secretariat, I tried to correct that but never got anywhere in my time as CDS. The relationship between the NSC secretariat, on a day-to-day basis, with other Government Departments is an area you might like to look at. In essence, without rehearsing it all in detail, I would share many of the Baroness's answers, but the detail may be a little different because I can shed more light on some of it.

Chair: Fantastic. I call Derek Twigg.

Q407 Derek Twigg: What did the Government gain by centralising the policy debate? What did it lose?

Lord Richards: Within the NSC?

Derek Twigg: Yes.

Lord Richards: Given the nature of the Committee, we are basically talking about defence issues, military strategy and things like that, although the same could apply across Government. All of you count yourselves, as I do, as people who think that we are not very good at strategy, but one thing we all know is that, particularly today, strategy, even military strategy, is more than just something that soldiers, sailors and airmen get on with. A modern campaign or war, whatever one wants to call it, involves all of Government. The great advantage of centralising it in the NSC—as we have previously discussed, there is a big difference between policy and strategy—is that the key decision makers in Government are party to important decisions at the very start of a process. As long as it is relevant and is not a committee taking a decision that should be devolved to a particular Department, it is probably a good thing.

Q408 Derek Twigg: Can you give some examples of where you think better or poorer decisions were made by the NSC? If you don't mind my quoting your book again, you say, "We had far too many meetings on Libya in the space of six months. We were constantly getting into what I call the tactical weeds as Cameron sought to micro-manage the campaign."

Lord Richards: Depending on who you believe, there were 54 or 67 meetings of the NSC in the space of six months or so. It depends on what you think the NSC is for, but I think it should focus on the strategic level and allow the relevant Government Department or, in the case of a war, the chiefs of staff to get on with meeting their objectives, within guidelines that the NSC establishes.

Q409 Derek Twigg: Is that what you mean by the phrase "tactical weeds"?

Lord Richards: Yes.

Q410 Derek Twigg: We got too much into the weeds, rather than into the strategy.

Lord Richards: Exactly. I am not certain that we ever really spoke enough about the strategy, but we spoke a lot about tactics.

Q411 Derek Twigg: But that is supposed to be what the NSC is about—strategy. I think you just said that you spoke a lot about strategy.

Lord Richards: No, I don't think they did talk a lot about the strategy on Libya—what was our “war plan” in old speak.

Q412 Derek Twigg: So you didn't have a war plan?

Lord Richards: We had one but at a tactical level, and don't forget that it was largely conducted through NATO.

Q413 Derek Twigg: But there was no strategy to it.

Lord Richards: What were Britain's objectives? What was our end-state for Libya? Where would we, as a result of defining one, invest more or do something differently? That sort of discussion didn't happen enough, whereas what we did talk a lot about was where ships were, when we would bomb someone and whether we could take out a TV tower, or whatever it might be. On the whole, I didn't think that was worthy of the NSC and, in a busy Government, it seemed to be occupying too much of their time.

Q414 Derek Twigg: It is also interesting—I found this amazing—that in your book, with regard to the Iraq policy, and you also mentioned Lebanon and Jordan, you said: “I pressed for a robust containment strategy—a no brainer. I found that everyone was focused on events inside Syria and getting rid of Assad, rather than on the risk of contagion from it. To my surprise”—this is what I found particularly interesting—“I was even asked by the NSC staff what was meant by ‘containment strategy’.” That is shocking, is it not?

Lord Richards: Yes, it is pretty shocking. That is why I thought, “I'll put it in the book.”

Q415 Derek Twigg: That is why it struck me when I read it.

Lord Richards: You are right. The biggest risks to anyone that bothers to stand back and look a little at it was the spread of this scourge. We were not very focused on it. By the way, the British Government were not the only Government involved who seemed to misunderstand the scale of the challenge. Today, look at the result of that. It is playing out in Iraq, and Jordan, as we read in the papers today, is looking very fragile, sadly. It is not too late to put a robust containment strategy in place, but three or four years ago, I was arguing for a Marshall plan scale of vision and generosity. If you look at the records of what we actually did collectively—not just the United Kingdom—it was pretty insignificant, given the challenge.

Q416 Derek Twigg: To go back to the Chair's original question—you said that you agree with much of what the Baroness said—we seem to have a situation where the Prime Minister was not strategic and the NSC was not strategic. One of its main purposes was to be strategic, but it was not there. What can be done to change that around?

Lord Richards: First, there may be a difference of opinion on what was strategic. People at the NSC acknowledge that they did—we all did—delve into tactics. By the way, I do not think it is a bad thing occasionally to ensure that senior members of Government understand the tactical consequences of a particular action, because that might be of strategic import.

Q417 Derek Twigg: In one part of the book, you said: “The redeployment of 120 men in a war in Afghanistan controlled by NATO, for example, should not have been taken by the NSC.”

Lord Richards: There were occasions when the NSC was less involved than that. That was just one example. This is where we are violently agreeing.

Q418 Mr Gray: Let me put an imaginary situation to you. Suppose the NSC had existed in 2006. Do you think the decision to deploy northwards into the northern part of Helmand would have been taken by the NSC, rather than on the grounds that it appears to have been taken?

Lord Richards: I would like to think it would have been. I do not know. I had probably just been deployed to Afghanistan. I would like to think that the Prime Minister of the day was at least aware of it. I am not so certain now, having read some stuff, but I was the NATO commander saddled with that decision and not very happy about it. I assumed at the time that it had got the Prime Minister’s chop. It now looks as though that may not have been the case. You are nodding your head.

Q419 Mr Gray: It appears from our evidence to have been a tactical level decision taken by a commander.

Lord Richards: While we are on that, I think that people in Britain did know. It is just how high that went. It is inconceivable to me that PJHQ did not know that that decision was being taken. I would have thought also that it would have been known within the MOD.

Q420 Mr Gray: Given what actually did happen, which was a light company deployment—a small number; 100 men or whatever it might be—being deployed initially northwards, you are of the view that that would have been the kind of decision that should have been taken by the NSC, had it then existed.

Lord Richards: Yes. In that case, it was not the size of the organisation or the company, but the implications for Britain. So far as I knew at the time, the British had agreed with my proposition—it is purely coincidence that I am here—and COMISAF’s proposition that they focus on Lashkar Gah and the immediate environs, which was all, given the size of the force we had, we could sensibly hope to secure. For various reasons that you are well aware of, the decision was taken to go into north Helmand. That clearly had significant implications for this country, as we now all know. I would not necessarily blame the brigade commander; he was under some pressure. Somewhere between the brigade commander and No. 10, that matter should have been referred to the Prime Minister, at least just as a check. Today, if I was CDS in that situation, I would have known that that was something you had to take to the Prime Minister—i.e. to the National Security Council. However, the one that Derek was talking about is different,

because that was within the parameters of an existing operation, and it was about 120 people going about two kilometres outside a boundary to help Americans who otherwise would have been pressed, which would have led to our people having a problem. So it was not quite in the same category.

Q421 Mrs Moon: How do you think the NSC has improved decision making on Syria and Iraq? Has it?

Lord Richards: I am 18 months or so out of it, so I can really only talk about when I was still there. I would have thought it has improved it a bit. At that time, the focus was on President Assad, rather than on ISIS, or Daesh, and that has obviously moved the goalposts a bit. I think—again, I do not want to draw attention to my book, but Derek has obviously read it—that I personally was rather disenchanted with the strategy, which wasn't really a strategy, that was driving us along in respect of Assad, so I came up with a different proposition, which I have described. It was never formally debated by the National Security Council. Going back to one of the points that you asked the Baroness about, the power of the secretariat is very great. I know that what I was proposing was “more than the market will bear”, and therefore, they did not want to debate it. I don't even know if the Prime Minister formally did take it, actually. When one attempts to raise alternative strategies, it will not necessarily be taken if it does not suit whatever agenda is driving the decision making of the day.

Q422 Mrs Moon: It is often said that in politics, the important meeting is the meeting before the meeting. I got the impression from the Baroness that she was saying that the meeting before the meeting was the meeting of the permanent secretaries, who basically decided, “This is what we are going to tell them they should do,” and then provided papers—advice, guidance, call it what you like, but it was a track in a direction. Has that meant that there is a lesser willingness and ability for Departments to be innovative and suggest a particular strand of policy, because they know it is going to get mangled anyway?

Lord Richards: That is one of the things that I did not entirely agree with in the Baroness's evidence. There was a necessary meeting every week called “National Security Council (Officials)” —that is the one you are talking about—at which, by the way, I also sat, normally with a lieutenant-general or major-general equivalent sitting in the wings, so to speak. That was to agree the agenda of the NSC itself, and also to discuss the papers that would be going to the NSC, usually a minimum of a week ahead, and sometimes two or three weeks ahead, so that Ministers—and I was in a slightly different position, along with people like the head of the SIS, because I was at that meeting and at the NSC; it was chaired by the NSA, by the way. We would debate or discuss the paper, criticise it, endorse it, or whatever—sensible housekeeping, actually. However, when the NSC subsequently discussed it—if that discussion went ahead and often, for some reason, it changed—I do not recognise the description of the NSC as rather choreographed in advance at all. I was quite impressed by the way our political leaders almost ignored their briefings and spoke from the heart, or from whatever was driving them. Obviously they would have notes, I am sure, but the discussion was quite spontaneous. In a way, you could argue that it was not as good for that reason, because officials would have prepared some quite well-informed points for good or ill, which often seemed to go out the window, and we came back to emotion and politics, but it was certainly a lively debate. Someone

once described it as Oxford Union—you know, No, 10. It was all good stuff. In the event, the actual meetings were less contrived and choreographed than perhaps she described.

Q423 Mrs Moon: I find that slightly more worrying if it was at the level of an emotional Oxford Union debate, rather than on the basis of informed intelligence.

Lord Richards: I would not want you to misconstrue it too much. It was very serious stuff, obviously, but it was spontaneous. On the whole, you did not see someone reading their brief. It was a proper discussion. I thought that was rather good, because it was not constrained by what a permanent under-secretary or whoever had prepared for his Minister to say. It got into a proper debate. Someone like me would say something in the middle of a discussion, which no one else had thought of. The head of the SIS or even one of the Ministers would say something. All that went out the window. You had to be able to debate it. On the whole, I thought those debates were rather good, but they were rather tactical. There was not enough strategic underpinning.

I have used these terms once or twice. How often does the term “UK’s vital national interests” become a key part of these debates? I have an idea they may do a bit more now, but, when I was there, very rarely. I used to rail against it: “Is this in our vital national interests?” “Is this really what we want to do?” It did not seem to matter whether that was a criterion or not. It was whatever was driving the particular Minister or Department that was driving that particular item on the agenda.—whatever they had come up with. I understand your point, but I think that on the whole it worked quite well. It was just rather tactical.

Q424 Mrs Moon: On the centralisation of decision making in the NSC, has that meant that military chiefs are sidelined to deal with financial and organisational issues, rather than operational issues? Does it mean there is less operational understanding in the room?

Lord Richards: I do not think you need routinely anyone else there at the NSC around the table, because the CDS ultimately has responsibility for the implementation of the military strategy. He has to know his onions or not be there. He alone is sufficient. I could come back to another committee. I will remind myself. I will write it down so I do not lose it.

Looking back on my time—three years of it—if I really dug my heels in, very rarely did the committee go against my military advice. What we have to be careful about is deluding ourselves that some of the decisions that we have talked about—Helmand, for example, and some of the Iraq errors—were taken post-2010. I cannot speak for the decision on Syria, because I had left just before that decision was taken, but it was as much political as anything else. On Libya, you can disagree with much of it, but actually, in a narrow sense, that was a successful campaign. Was it nested within a proper strategy? You can draw your own deductions. On the whole I think it probably was not.

But it is tough. I remember talking to the Prime Minister more than once about how difficult these problems are. While sitting here with the benefit of hindsight, it looks pretty straightforward, but it ain’t quite like that. You have to stop Benghazi collapsing. Do you let it collapse or do something about it and hope that you will sort it out afterwards? Well, it was a little bit of the latter, but if you hadn’t got on with it, Benghazi would have collapsed. So these things are not easy. But I think that, on the whole, the military advice around that time was listened to.

Syria, I am on record as having misgivings about our inability, but it wasn't just Britain; the whole of the western coalition plus other countries failed to do it properly in those critical years of 2011-12. We are now living with the residue of that and it has got far worse. If we had acted resolutely and at the right scale back in 2012, I would argue that there was a good chance that we might have mitigated many of the risks that we have now seen play out. But it was not just Britain that was guilty of this; every other major country was in the same place. So I think we have got to be slightly forgiving of Britain's inability to change the world any more. I think I picked up before that we are but part of a coalition.

Q425 Ms Stuart: Can I come back to the issue of discussions? Without wishing to say that Oxford Union debates are bad, there may have been serious discussions, but the people around the table may not have known what they were talking about or lacked the facts. You are now in a position where, to put it bluntly—the Baroness was outspoken about this and we did not disagree with her—you have: a Prime Minister who is not strategic; a Foreign Secretary who now realises that being Defence Secretary is a much better job, and he still rather hopes that he had that role; and a Defence Secretary that comes to the job with rather little background. We are two months from a general election where the most unpredictable outcomes are possible and, in the meantime, I think that neither Mr Putin, nor Libya, nor Syria or any of the other places will wait until Britain finds a mechanism to articulate its national interest following a general election. The whole notion of your independent civil service and the independent structures means that UK plc Government goes on whatever the politicians who come and go do and it takes some direction.

Given that our report is trying to look beyond the next general election to whatever the Strategic Defence and Security Review comes up with and how we can recognise it as strategic, part of that is the National Security Council. If you were given a blueprint, given the dynamics of the current Government and the electoral cycle, how could you tell if there was someone out there who was really thinking about what is happening in Russia, what our national interest is and how we define that? How can we tell that something is happening that we cannot grasp but we know that someone needs to do?

Lord Richards: The Foreign Office is, I think, the prime source of that advice, informed by Ministry of Defence and one or two other Departments. Those are primarily where the departmental responsibilities lie. But by creating the NSC, you have created a thing called the NSC secretariat, led by a National Security Adviser and I believe that what we have not really done is transferred to him and his organisation the power, knowledge and authority that he really needs to do his job properly. It should include a senior general on his staff in the same way as in the American system where there is usually a three-star general or admiral on the staff of the secretariat. I don't know why that is. I think it is Whitehall's bureaucratic reluctance to give the NSA the authority and influence he needs. Some of it is personality-driven. Does the NSA want that role? I don't know; you would need to speak to Kim Darroch and Peter Ricketts about that. But I think some of it is to do with that, too.

Q426 Ms Stuart: If one reads your book or follows what General Mike Jackson did in the Balkans, one sees there are occasions when the military turns round to politicians and says, "We are not going to do this. It is a really bad idea. Are you absolutely sure that that is what you want to do?" Should the NSA have the authority to say, "Prime Minister, you may not

want to think about this, but you really have to.” Is the key the person who succeeds Kim Darroch? Is that how we can tell whether the role has really grown?

Lord Richards: That is a very important decision. There is nothing to stop the NSA saying that now; it is just that I don’t think he has the mechanism around him to do it with the knowledge and authority that he should have. However, there is nothing to stop the NSA being very steely with the Prime Minister, just as there is nothing to stop the CDS being steely with him over anything. I assure you that that has happened, even on my watch.

Q427 Ms Stuart: Cardinal Newman used to say that it is better to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission. Should the NSA work on the principle that, if he feels driven, as the military on occasion does, he should push the boat out?

Lord Richards: I am just thinking through my watch. That probably happened with the military more than you think, but not to the point at which there is a conflict. It is a process of mutual awareness. You are talking to a Prime Minister, who happens to be a very approachable man. People kept saying to me, “He likes to debate things properly.” I felt no doubt that, in this Prime Minister, we have someone who is very open for a debate, but that didn’t mean that he would necessarily agree with you. If the issue was so critical or so risky from the military perspective that the CDS really felt that he couldn’t countenance it, I don’t think the Prime Minister ever went against that view in my three years. However, there were very few occasions for that. Personally, I didn’t particularly like getting involved in the Libyan campaign, but ultimately that is what the Government wanted to do, and we got on and did it quite well tactically.

In Syria, there were variations on a theme. We would have got more involved, but I argued against that. I said, “Either do it properly”—as I recounted, and as was leaked last summer—“or don’t do it at all.” Well, we did a bit against Assad, but we did not get involved in the way that certain people were advocating—from my point of view, quite damagingly so. I felt that there were too many risks and that it had not been thought through strategically, and the Prime Minister listened to my view. There weren’t many other things going on; ISIS is different. On my watch, those were the two big things that happened.

On Afghanistan, the prevailing view in the Government was that we should get out, but during my time I argued very robustly that at Lisbon and Chicago we, along with many other Governments, had made a solemn promise to the Afghans that we would remain in a combat role until the end of 2014. It did not matter to me whether that was wrong or right, unless there was some drama; that is what we promised to do. I argued strongly that there was good military sense in doing so, because it would give the Afghans the maximum chance to develop the necessary skills. Although I know that the Government didn’t like it, to their great credit that was agreed.

I had a very difficult debate in the NSC. I think I put in the book that I knew that I was the only person in that room who had my view, yet, at the end of the day, they agreed with me even though no one really wanted to. I had very little support.

Q428 Dr Lewis: I want to go back to the question of the NSC staffing, because like Mr Twigg I found it pretty shocking that supposedly well-informed supporting staff for a military-oriented organisation had not even heard of the concept of containment. I also found

it pretty shocking that you were saying that, as the Government's top military adviser, you could want to put forward a notion or plan, yet civil servants could keep that off the NSC's agenda. I have in front of me the memorandum written by one of our advisers that you may have heard me quote a little earlier when Baroness Neville-Jones was here. I want to quote a different part and see whether you agree with it. It says: "It has been a long-standing ambition of the senior civil service to reduce the role of professional military advice and of technical civilian advice in departmental policy formulation and strategic decision making. The core competences of senior officials do not necessarily qualify them for senior policy roles in the MOD, where a deep understanding of national security and military strategy is required." Do you think that that is a fair comment on the situation?

Lord Richards: On the ambition of senior civil servants, I cannot comment. Well, actually, I think that they probably did have that ambition, but I can tell you that that is absolutely not the case. Whoever wrote that is out of date. Without wishing to prolong my answer too much, the PUS of the MOD, for example, is not a member of the National Security Council and, as the baroness said, there are no PUSs in anything more than attendance. In fact, the PUS for the Foreign Office does sit there, but I do not think that he is formally part of it—he has somehow inveigled his way in and is there. At the actual point of decision by the NSC itself, there are only the heads of the agencies and the CDS.

If he has anything about him—although I will caveat this slightly with reference to the power of the secretariat—if the CDS has been constrained in the run-up to the actual debate, there is nothing to prevent him from saying in the NSC, "Prime Minister, you have said all this, but I insist, please, that we discuss A, B and C." There is nothing to stop him. I certainly did that, and I have no reason to think that my successor will not. I know that on more than one occasion the head of the SIS and other officials did it. So even though they might try, I do not think that that is the case.

In military strategy, I did not really detect that. On the whole I spoke quite readily and freely at these NSCO meetings and did not detect that people were trying to prevent me from saying what I thought. I would say that your point is germane regarding the power of the NSA secretariat itself. In the context of Syria, even though I wrote on three occasions to the NSA—it goes into its workings—about Syria, expecting it to be debated in the NSC, they chose not to bring it to the NSC. When I asked why, I was fobbed off, so you are half right.

Q429 Dr Lewis: Can we get the mechanics of this right? When you say the NSA secretariat, is that the same body of people that serves the NSC itself?

Lord Richards: Sorry; it is better to say the NSC secretariat, but they work for the NSA.

Q430 Dr Lewis: Right. And they are dedicated civil servants attached purely to the NSC—is that right?

Lord Richards: Yes; they are largely civil servants from the Foreign Office. I think there are representatives from many Departments, mainly Foreign Office and MOD. The Treasury is in there and DFID with the odd one.

Q431 Dr Lewis: These are the people who decide whether something you put forward would get on the agenda. These are the people—one does not want to overload a single incident—who might not know what containment was.

Lord Richards: Yes. When I wrote that, I do not think that was the NSA himself who said that, but reasonably senior people wanted to understand what a containment strategy was, which rather surprised me. They don't get on any courses. It is not like in the military, when you get on the High Command and Staff course. As far as I can see, they are just posted to the NSC. Maybe they have some interest or background, but I do not think all of them do.

Q432 Dr Lewis: Did you agree when Baroness Neville-Jones said yes—I thought quite decisively—when asked if there should be a military sub-committee of the National Security Council and whether that would be a worthwhile development? Do you share that view?

Lord Richards: Yes, but actually there is one. I do not know if my successor is using it. In my frustration, I credit something that we colloquially call the Super Chiefs, which was a meeting chaired by the CDS at which sat the NSA—remember, the chair is the CDS—the head of the SIS, the head of GCHQ, the head of the Foreign Office, the head of DFID and the Chiefs. That never really came properly to fulfil its potential, but it was allowed, and Peter Ricketts and then Kim Darroch both attended it. My attempt in it was also to look at longer-term strategy, which of course, as she said, we tend not to do.

Q433 Dr Lewis: I want to proceed a little further, if I may. Would it be true to say that the path to becoming CDS is invariably to become First Sea Lord, Chief of the General Staff or Chief of the Air Staff? In other words, the person who becomes the top military strategic adviser to Government invariably does it by becoming the head of one or other of the three armed forces.

Lord Richards: No. Two CDSs have been Vice-Chiefs and were not head of their own service: Dick Vincent and the current CDS.

Q434 Dr Lewis: In any event, they were at the No. 2 level. What I am trying to get at is this: if there were to be a strengthening of the military advice—the strategic advice, the strategic input—into this new apparatus, which everyone seems to agree potentially could fill the vacuum in identifying where military strategy is debated and decided, would it not be sensible that something like the Chiefs of Staff Committee should fulfil the role of being the military sub-committee?

Lord Richards: Yes. In effect, it is, but it has not been formalised since the NSC was formed. Everyone will talk about the Chiefs and the Chiefs of Staff Committee, and we would obviously discuss things—I would come back from the NSC often and have a Chiefs of Staff meeting within 24 hours, to download and to make sure that they were in the mind of the Prime Minister and my own. In practice, it does exist, but the relationship between the Chiefs of Staff Committee, the NSC secretariat and the NSC itself is not written down—as far as I know, you will not find it anywhere on paper. That is the bit that needs formalising. So you are right, but I do not think that you need a new committee—I think we are agreeing—because you have a committee that does it, and the Super Chiefs is also a rather good innovation, although I would say that, because it is where you bring in the other key Departments of State at a level between the two.

Q435 Dr Lewis: What you are saying to us is that the structure is there, but I assume that, like the NSC itself, it still needs a stronger secretariat of its own if it is going to become fully integrated with, and the natural precursor to, every major meeting of the NSC.

Lord Richards: The Chiefs of Staff secretariat is weak, I would agree, but that is a reflection of cuts and so on. It sort of works, but there is also a new committee called the Armed Forces Committee which, on a routine departmental basis, is probably more important than the Chiefs of Staff Committee, which has a focus on the operational side of life.

Q436 Dr Lewis: But the Super Chiefs Committee goes wider than the Chiefs of Staff—

Lord Richards: Super Chiefs does not have any special secretariat. We sort of use the Chiefs of Staff secretariat to meet the secretariat requirement. We agree that there are bare bones of something that can be made to work much better. The NSC secretariat certainly needs up-gunning generally. It is very small. In the middle of a war, they are told to cut; that is the very moment that they perhaps should have been told to put a few more people in.

Q437 Dr Lewis: We are now right at the heart of the matter. We have a National Security Council, which is intended to be the forum for debate and decision, and the accountable body when we see the consequences of those decisions. However, it is insufficiently served by a professional secretariat. Similarly, there is, even more skeletally, something that you put in place called the Super Chiefs, who would be able to give what in old terms would have been called joint military advice to that body, but they have no real dedicated secretariat. It seems that the ingredients are there for a sensible decision-making structure. Would you therefore agree that it is unsatisfactory, to put it mildly, that from time to time when these campaigns are going on, individual Chiefs of the Services say that they really have little or no input into the strategy of an ongoing campaign because they have been, to a large extent, sidelined?

Finally—I am sorry that it is a rather long preamble but we are on a converging path—you mentioned in one of your earlier points the role of the permanent under-secretary. I questioned him on this business, and his response was to say, “Oh, the Chiefs of Staff don’t mind being out of the loop on these strategic matters and are happy to regard themselves primarily as chief executives of their particular service.” I think that I am right that the permanent under-secretary is a person from a non-defence background, so you can see where the thrust of my line of argument is going and I would be grateful for your analysis and comment on it.

Lord Richards: I can absolutely see where it is going. I broadly agree, but there are a couple of details. The Chiefs of Staff, in my day, met every week. I increased the length of time of the meeting from one hour to two. There was some griping about it, I have to say. The reason I did that was that I felt that that is ultimately their principal and primary role—not chief executives of the Army, Navy and Air Force. Of course, they are that too. But I think that that has been changed and they may now only meet once a month. You can find that out.

The role of the CDS has become more important because he—I think that this is almost constitutional—works from the Prime Minister, or the authority goes from the Prime Minister to the CDS and then to the operational commander. It no longer goes through the

Chiefs of Staff per se. On a day-to-day basis, the chiefs are not consulted on, shall we say, variations on a theme. But they absolutely should be part of the strategy.

I can only speak for the four years that I was CGS, or CDS as it was then. But when I hear chiefs say that they were not privy to or part of the strategy, I am afraid that I do not buy that. If they were here, they could tell me why they think that. On a day-to-day basis, the CDS is working to his operations staff. Nine times out of 10, it is not necessarily to consult a particular chief. But you would be surprised how often they meet and will be kept in each other's minds.

Q438 Dr Lewis: Finally from me, you have said that the super-chiefs could become the military sub-committee of the NSC. Does what you call the super-chiefs have an official name, and, if so, what is it?

Lord Richards: I do not think it does. Just to be absolutely clear, the super-chiefs were not just military.

Q439 Dr Lewis: Yes, I have got that point. That is why they were super-chiefs.

Lord Richards: Good. In modern war, you need those people in there: GCHQ and the SIS. It is an enhancement. In the old days, in world war two, as you know better than I do, the chiefs included SIS and people. They went in and sat there, and they were subordinate—"You do as you're bloody told," sort of thing. Today, we are all equal, so you have got to get them in there as party to that committee. I think that that is probably the solution. It is not strictly military, but it is all the key actors.

I think that their remit should be, going back to the issue about strategy, to require Government to place their decisions in a strategic context, or however you want to phrase it. The head of that, the CDS, should be working closely with the NSA. By the way, personalities really do matter. The selection of the right person for these jobs is really important. Make sure that they have got the right background and the right temperament. I did hint at this in my book a little bit. I talked about needing securocrats rather than necessarily diplomats, for example.

Q440 Chair: Lord Richards, you have been very generous with your time. I am aware that we are running out of time, and I must bring in Derek and James. Just as a quick comment, I think it is bizarre suddenly to put the heads of MI6, MI5 and GCHQ into a strategic role. Nothing in their entire careers has prepared them for that. It is a very odd thing to do. They spend their entire careers being asked to provide intelligence in response to a JIC requirement—not even to analyse that intelligence but simply to provide it—and then suddenly they are expected at the very end of their career to talk about grand strategy. I think it is a deeply worrying concept.

Lord Richards: I entirely agree. The trouble is, Mr Chairman, that that is fact. They are sitting now around the NSC. Maybe, like the military, they need to start being trained to think like that earlier in their careers, however bright they are. John Sawers, as an example, was very well able to take part in those debates, but he had been a diplomat and at the UN, and so on and so forth. Others, I think, were less comfortable.

Q441 Derek Twigg: General Richards, in the book, you flag up your frustration when you became commander in chief about the ability to pin down who was responsible for decisions

and their subsequent execution. I would like to take you on to a point that we have had some discussion about: the relationship between the CDS and the chiefs, and decision making. In your book you say that you had an opportunity to introduce Lord Mountbatten's recommendations of the early '60s, when he proposed that the CDS should exercise full command of the armed forces rather than attempting to do so through the moral authority he possesses as chairman of the Chiefs of Staff committee. The chiefs obviously reported to the Secretary of State. Could you tell us how that would have improved decision making?

Lord Richards: First of all, there is a lot of inter-service rivalry, which you are all well aware of, and that can manifest itself in attempts to undermine the Chief of the Defence Staff—either wittingly or unwittingly, to be charitable. If you spoke to Lord Stirrup, he felt this very keenly and he talked about how he was *primus inter pares*, but ultimately the Prime Minister looks to the CDS to deliver on defence. By the way, I should say that this was not in an operational context, just so we are absolutely clear. This is in day-to-day stuff. It was very difficult to deliver—

Q442 Derek Twigg: So it was more in a strategic sense?

Lord Richards: The CDS has all the authority he needs, give or take, on operational command issues. When you are in Afghanistan or whatever, the Prime Minister, through and with the NSC, gives the CDS direction. The CDS goes back to the MOD and he implements that direction. He does not need to ask anybody; he has got the authority to do it. Those troops, aircraft, sailors and ships are under his command. Once those assets are deployed, the chiefs have only operational command. What you are quoting back to me is the wider issue of the three services playing different people off against each other. It is not an operational command issue.

To give you an example, in the SDSR, on the CDS, I had this conversation with the Prime Minister, and he thought that I could deliver defence. Actually that isn't the case. The single services answer to the Secretary of State for Defence. All I could do was co-ordinate that. Through the creation of the armed forces committee we strengthened the role of the CDS but the Prime Minister did not understand that I did not command them.

Q443 Derek Twigg: Give us an example of how, if you had got your way, that would have improved. What would have been a decision better taken differently?

Lord Richards: You rightly say, "You are prejudiced, so you would say this, wouldn't you?" But look at the case of the carriers, for example. I felt strongly that the acquisition of two huge carriers would be pretty difficult for the rest of defence and, I have to say, the Government were quite sympathetic to my view, but the three services worked directly with the Secretary of State for Defence on that separately, so it did not matter what the CDS felt, even though people expected him to be able to deliver a single services voice. He cannot, because that is not the way that it is constructed. The Secretary of State for Defence, the single services and the civil service were very happy with that, because it meant that they could divide and rule—they regularly did. That would be an example.

Q444 Derek Twigg: So you would have stopped it, basically?

Lord Richards: I would have had more authority to stop it. Mind you, I have to say that that decision was taken before I took over, so it is an example of the sort of thing that subsequently you could have had more influence over. There are other things, too.

Q445 **Chair:** Lord Richards, to bring us to a close—and thank you for your time—I suppose the thing that struck the Committee most in our last report, which was on Iraq, was a real lack of confidence coming out of the military. We had the chiefs testifying to us, and one after another they said, “We don’t really know what the mission is. We are not really sure that there is a strategy. We don’t really know what the end state is.” They were very reluctant to offer any views on what was happening on the ground in Iraq—there was a lot of, “Well, that’s up to my employers,” or, “That’s up to the Foreign Office.” Then we would look at the civilians, and they would say, “Hey, that’s not really our thing.” That then combined with what we saw on the ground, which was very little British presence to be seen. There were 400 Australians, 300 Spaniards, 300 Italians outside the Kurdish areas, and three Brits. There was no real understanding on the ground or real grip on what is happening in Sunni tribal areas or with Shi’a militia.

The conclusion the Committee reached was that whatever we have done in these reforms and whatever this NSC has done, it appears to have produced an extraordinary lack of confidence and hollowing out. There was some sort of idea that some thing—presumably in this case the NSC, so these politicians—is in charge. Everyone else backs out and leaves it to this NSC thing to work out what they are doing. The reality is that in an hour a week busy politicians have simply no capacity to develop energised, serious plans in relation to Iraq. In your closing remarks, could you try to help us see our way through that?

Lord Richards: I am disappointed to hear that that was the view. This was last autumn, was it?

Chair: Yes—and through January, too.

Lord Richards: First of all, there is a reluctance to appear to question Government policy among all officials and military people, particularly in the run-up to an election, so they are more tight-lipped than they probably need to be, but perhaps that is natural. At the end of the day, I go back to the point I made about where the real power lies. I no longer know what is being debated in the NSC, but if I am half right, there will be people there who will be saying to the Government—the Prime Minister and the key Ministers there—that we need to know what the aim is and how we are going to take this forward. I would be most surprised if the NSA isn’t asking those sorts of questions of the Government.

You need to ask the Government, rather than officials, why the strategy—if you could grace it with that term—was more opaque than you or I would wish. It doesn’t matter how good the super-chiefs are, if they are still meeting, or the NSCO, as there was another organisation called the National Security Council Officials—informal—where the key PUSs, the CDS and a few others would meet to discuss longer term strategy. It does not matter how much you do that if there is not a political appetite to enter into that process and do it in the way that the textbooks might suggest.

That is the problem at the moment. I know senior political leaders who do not want to use the term “strategy”. They do not like strategy. It ties them in, and stops them veering and hauling according to the latest opinion poll, or whatever it is. If I may, until your political

leaders actually recognise that this is a really serious issue—I know you are doing a hell of a lot to draw attention to it—and that when they don't the result is as you describe, I do not think it is going to get much better, sadly.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time.