



Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan

Wednesday 23 September 2020

10 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Baroness Fall; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Lord Mendelsohn; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Reid of Cardowan.

Evidence Session No. 3

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 18 - 29

Witness

I: Sir Richard Stagg, former British Ambassador to Afghanistan.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witness

Sir Richard Stagg.

Q18 The Chair: Good morning. Welcome to this meeting of the International Relations and Defence Select Committee of the House of Lords. Today we are taking evidence for our inquiry: the UK and Afghanistan. I would like to welcome our first witness Sir Richard Stagg, who is a former British Ambassador to Afghanistan. I remind Members and witnesses that the session is on the record, broadcast and transcribed. I also remind Members to declare any interests when asking their questions.

Welcome, Sir Richard. Thank you for joining us to share your expertise. I shall as usual ask the first question, which will be rather general in its scope, and then turn to my colleagues, who will put more detailed questions.

What is your assessment of the prospects for the negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban? What would success look like and what would happen if the talks failed?

Sir Richard Stagg: Thank you very much indeed, Chair. Two factors will determine whether the talks work. The first is whether both sides have concluded that they cannot win by military means and therefore need to reach a negotiated settlement. The second is whether they are sufficiently united among themselves.

On the first point, the government of Afghanistan seem pretty clear in their intent. It is much less easy to read the Taliban's views. It has clearly been brought into these talks in large measure through American diplomacy, which must raise a question as to whether it is as committed to a peaceful resolution of the conflict as it needs to be.

The second issue is equally worrying, in that the Afghan government is made up of two very different groups, who have been in political conflict for most of the period since 2001. The Taliban is a very diverse group with many different factions and tendencies, which makes it difficult to be sure that it has a coherent single view.

Looking from the outside, my conclusion is that the odds must be against success, but that there is a realistic possibility of the negotiation working. If it does not work, I think the outcome will be a reversion to the conflict, which is currently continuing. The fighting goes on. The deaths continue at the moment and that will return to being the normal status quo.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed for setting the scene, Sir Richard. One of the strong points you made will be drawn out a bit more by our first questioner, Lord Reid.

Q19 Lord Reid of Cardowan: Good morning, Sir Richard. You have touched upon this. Can I probe it a little further? In so far as any of us can reach an objective assessment of the Taliban's motivations for joining the talks, could you give us a little more on your assessment of this? I noticed a healthy scepticism there. Do you think it is a tactical move on its part

rather than a strategic commitment to sharing power? Secondly, if the Taliban was to play a role in government, what role could or should it play? How is this to be achieved?

Sir Richard Stagg: There are some reasons for believing in the genuineness of the Taliban's interest in talks. We all focus on the losses and suffering on the government side, but there has clearly been huge loss on the Taliban side in deaths, injuries and damage. We sometimes underestimate the degree to which the Taliban is unhappy living in exile in Pakistan. It has a very complicated relationship with its hosts, which it would like to bring to an end. To a degree, some of the leaders are quite tired after 20 years of conflict. It is not clear-cut that they are uninterested in a resolution, but there is evidence that they continue to feel that they need a military route to success, and it is unclear whether they will abandon that easily or quickly.

In terms of the way in which the Taliban might become part of a government, it is very difficult to predict the end of these negotiations. My assumption is that it would need to be offered a role in the government that reflected the political constituency which it believes it represents. One mistake that the West has made over the last 20 years has been to see the Taliban as a rather small collection of fanatics rather than a group that represents one strand of genuine opinion in Afghanistan, and particularly one strand of Pashtun opinion. Some of our problems have come from not accepting that it represents a view that many Pashtuns, particularly men, share, however much we think it is the wrong view.

The outcome of it is very difficult to predict, but it would need to involve the Taliban being able to show its supporters that they had a genuine voice in the government after an agreement. Otherwise, its supporters would ask, "Why have we done this?"

Q20 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Good morning, Dickie. It is very nice to see you. I should declare that I was a member of the embassy in Kabul, but rather a little time before you.

I would like to turn now to the question of Pakistan and its role. I would like you to give us some feeling of your assessment of the role of Pakistan in the Doha negotiations most immediately, but also in any settlement that came out of that, or any failure to reach a settlement out of Doha. I would also like to ask you whether you believe that Pakistan could allow its interests to become compatible with those of the Afghan government—and of the UK, I would add—as it has so often not done in the past, when it has played a very destabilising role in Afghanistan.

To add one more thought to it, what about the other main regional players? Is there any role at all for real regional co-operation to sustain and stabilise a settlement if one is reached?

Sir Richard Stagg: That is quite a portmanteau question, so I will do my best. Come back to me if I unintentionally miss out points you have raised. Like India, Pakistan tends to view Afghanistan in the first place as

a part of its global battleground, and a particularly important part of it; it is obviously a neighbour of Pakistan's and the Indians see it as a country that could become a safe haven for terrorists targeting India.

Pakistan has a very specific view of Afghanistan that is not particularly related to the Western view. It wants to avoid Afghanistan and India becoming friends and partners. It wants to have a degree of control over the governance of Afghanistan. It wants to use Afghanistan as a tool by which to oblige the West, broadly described, to work with Pakistan to resolve the problems in Afghanistan, which we want to resolve for our own reasons. I think it sees Afghanistan in a relatively self-serving way. The history of the two countries is obviously very difficult. Afghanistan was the only country that voted against Pakistan joining the United Nations after partition, and it continues to believe that the Durand line is not a legitimate indicator of the border between the two countries.

It is a pretty fraught relationship and Pakistan has not played a very helpful role at any stage. As the host for the Taliban, it has effectively provided a "safe haven", for lack of a better word, for the Taliban to operate relatively freely, and to return to Pakistan for military, financial, and other support in its battle with the government in Kabul. We have all found it very difficult to encourage Pakistan to play a genuinely helpful role rather than saying the right things, but often doing things we find unhelpful and damaging.

Linking up with the Doha talks, the release of Mullah Baradar was quite an important moment in the development of what is now the Doha process. The Pakistanis took a long time to agree to release him and the regime they insisted on for trying to talk to him before his release was very complicated. The Pakistanis' view the presence of the Taliban as a burden and a cost in some ways, but a strategic asset in others.

In the Doha talks, their interest is in an outcome that leaves a government in Kabul over which they have a reasonable degree of influence. For them, that would probably mean the Taliban being able to control at least certain areas of policy and ensure that the government in Kabul did not become a hostile force. For understandable reasons, they do not want a hostile neighbour on their border. I honestly do not know how closely they are involved in these talks. They have had a very close relationship with the Afghan Taliban, who have lived in Pakistan for most of the last 20 years and have depended upon them. I am afraid I do not really know whether they are actively engaged in the minutiae of these talks.

In terms of the major neighbours in the region, India also sees Afghanistan as part of its battles with Pakistan in large measure. It wants to ensure that Afghanistan does not become too close an ally of Pakistan or a safe haven for terrorists targeting India itself. As you will know from two of your postings, Lord Hannay, Iran has tended to view the west of Afghanistan as, if not part of Iran, certainly an area of its backyard over which it has some degree of control. That is an issue on which it is less

focused at the moment because of other problems it faces, but that has historically been very much the case.

Probably the most interesting power regionally is China. When I worked there from 2012 to 2015, it was relatively uninvolved day to day, although clearly with big interests at stake long term. It seems to me that its role in the last two or three years has increased, and not just in Afghanistan; it has become more interested in trying to play a role with Pakistan in ensuring that Afghanistan does not represent a threat to China's interests. In the short term, it has abandoned its interest in big commercial gains. You may know that it invested in the biggest copper mine in Afghanistan at the beginning of the post-2001 period. It invested in some of the biggest oil and gas reserves in Afghanistan. That has all moved on now and its main goal is to have a neighbour that does not cause it problems.

Q21 Baroness Rawlings: Sir Richard, thank you very much indeed for coming today. I have to declare an interest. I am a patron of the Mother and Child Rescue Clinics in the Panjshir Valley.

How would you assess the relationship between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah after several months of them working together, with Abdullah Abdullah basically in charge of finance and foreign affairs? To what extent do you think that it provides a basis for resolution of ongoing tensions and solving problems, especially corruption and the opium trade?

Sir Richard Stagg: I have to declare an interest: I was very personally involved in the efforts to resolve the disputed outcome of the 2014 presidential election. Obviously we have had another disputed election between the two of them since then.

The starting point was a poor relationship. Abdullah Abdullah was in the jihad, and he worked closely with Massoud during the Soviet occupation. Dr Ghani was an academic in the US for much of that time, I think at Johns Hopkins, and then a World Bank official. They have very different backgrounds in terms of their mental geography. They are very different sorts of people: Ashraf Ghani is a very technocratic, details person; Abdullah Abdullah is probably a more natural politician. They are both very talented. In a country such as Afghanistan, it is unusual to have two leaders who are genuinely very capable and could probably get jobs in political systems around the world because of their natural abilities. But they have had a long history of difference since 2001.

I have not been in Afghanistan for almost two years, but my impression is that they have found a *modus vivendi*. The appointment of Abdullah Abdullah to be the lead on the talks is very shrewd. It means that the Tajiks, who are the most hesitant about the Taliban as a principally Pashtun movement, are taking the lead in a sense. If they can find a basis on which to compromise with the Taliban, it is likely that it will be acceptable to most Afghans who support the current government .

In terms of where we go on the wider policies, the government's focus is on trying to resolve the issue of the negotiations. That is the key to the other issues. Taking the opium trade as an example, if the government writ does not run very widely, it is very difficult to prevent people growing and selling opium. Unless that issue is resolved, the others will be very difficult to deal with. Certainly until recently, and I would imagine still, the Taliban has tended to be an opponent to the opium trade in principle but a beneficiary in practice. I see no reason why it would change that policy. It gets not only financial gain from it, but support from the farmers it helps to market their opium while the government are trying to close down their businesses. At the moment, the logic is pretty compelling for the Taliban to stay where it is.

To conclude, the relationship between these two individuals is very complicated. I get the impression from 4,000 miles away that they have now found a way to give each of them a very important role commensurate with their capabilities and that they are both doing things that are critical to the country's future.

Q22 Lord Alton of Liverpool: Can I ask about the building of civil society in Afghanistan and the promotion of the values that we represent in the UK: diversity, pluralism and tolerance? To what extent have international and domestic efforts to build Afghanistan's institutions, such as the judiciary, been successful? How can initiatives to promote the rule of law, the rights of minorities, the rights of women, freedom of religion and belief, freedom of expression, and the anti-corruption measures Baroness Rawlings asked about, be sustained and strengthened in the future?

Sir Richard Stagg: To start, where are we today? It varies a great deal depending on the area that one looks at. In some areas, we can genuinely say that our efforts have yielded considerable results. Looking at the freedom of the media, the position of women in Afghan society, education and its multiple impacts, there is a great deal of progress. It is likely that that will continue. This is obviously a much-contested issue.

Even when I was there, five years ago, there was clear evidence inside the Taliban that it was thinking about how it would integrate its own philosophy with the reality of modern Afghanistan. Some of the things that have been achieved in the last 20 years will be very difficult to undo. For example, the education of girls has been happening since 2001. There are whole generations who have experienced school and, in some cases, university. You cannot undo that. There is a good hope that these freedoms will be sustained, even if there is pushback from the Taliban in some future settlement, to try to constrain and constrict them to a degree.

Other areas of our philosophy have found the Hindu Kush quite thin soil for the plant to grow. The judiciary and the rule of law have not really made the progress that we hoped, even when I was there. I suspect there is likely to be great difficulty in sustaining where we have got to, let alone moving it forward in a government with the Taliban. It obviously has a view that Sharia law, and a particular Sunni version of Sharia law,

should be the basis for the Afghan judicial system. Even under the present regime, the country is an Islamic republic guided by Islam.

Corruption is a very complicated story. The honest answer is that our own involvement, and particularly the Americans' involvement, turbo-charged corruption in a sense. Huge sums of money were suddenly being poured into the economy with no obvious home to go to. The large-scale corruption that occurred in the 2000s and 2010s could not have happened without this Western money pouring into the system. It is possible that the situation on corruption will get better as the Western involvement pulls back. The Taliban has a puritanical view about the role of the state and the way individuals relate to it, which could be as potent in changing Afghan cultural ways as advocacy from the Western democracies. Corruption is very difficult to call, but we sadly cannot look at it as an issue on which we have had a story of much success in the last 20 years.

The Taliban has clearly never shown much interest in democracy. It came to power in 1996 by offering a prospectus of ending the civil war. It is now effectively trying to get back to power through forcing its way to the negotiation with the barrel of a gun. It would be foolish to say that it will be strong on sustaining democratic systems and processes. Being in some ways an optimist, I hope that the Afghan people, having had some chance of a say in their country's governance, will be reluctant to see that removed from them by the government in Kabul.

Historically, Afghanistan has had a pretty dispersed system of government, with the central power having only relatively constrained abilities to determine how life goes on in the provinces. It is perfectly possible that we will find that democracy, even if not working in quite the way we hope at the central level, may continue to exist in different ways lower down the system.

Q23 Lord Mendelsohn: Thank you, Sir Richard, for your evidence so far. Can I probe some of the other domestic considerations? Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country, which has a very substantial Pashtun population, but it has many other significant ethnic groups. I wondered about your assessment of how that ethnic mix works together and its prospects, and your observation as to whether the current constitutional arrangements are working well to cohere society, particularly its ethnic dimension, at both the central level and the provincial governor level.

Sir Richard Stagg: For me, having lived in Afghanistan—and I went to Afghanistan directly from India—it is quite striking that there is very little sign of secessionist pressures. In India, they are manifest, and you will know about them. Even though there are, in Afghanistan, populations with very clear links to their neighbours—the Turkmens, the Tajiks and so on—there is no real evidence that they much want to join these neighbours as part of a different political arrangement. Most of them seem, in principle, to be happy to be part of Afghanistan. I am talking about 2015, but then, certainly, when you asked people about it in

Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat or wherever, there was no sense that this was a big issue for people.

A much bigger issue, to your constitutional question, was their relationship with the centre, and what power they were allowed to exercise at their level rather than being told what to do by Kabul. The constitution that emerged in 2002 and 2003 was, to be honest, a slightly unusual confection. It was based on the US presidential system, essentially, even down to having a rule against more than two terms in office. It was quite centralised, so it had almost a French feel to it in the role of the President.

If there is some settlement with the Taliban, I think that will change, because it will be much easier for the two main participants in the negotiations to reach agreement if some degree of flexibility can be shown in different parts of the country, depending on their wishes and priorities. You could imagine that, in the south and east, the rather patriarchal Pashtun society may be content with a more Islamic style of governance than we would think ideal, whereas in Mazar-i-Sharif or Herat you may find a rather different way of running the country.

There is scope to see this arrangement work reasonably well. Historically, except for a brief period at the end of the 19th century, Afghanistan has had central governments with relatively limited ability to effect their wishes across the country. That is not a bad outcome for the country, looking at the next 10 or 20 years, rather than trying to reach a negotiated settlement that covers all issues in detail, on the basis that the central power will control what happens in all the provinces.

To sum up, I have seen surprisingly little secessionist pressure in Afghanistan. What may emerge from these talks, if they work, is a more suitable constitutional arrangement for Afghanistan than the constitution the western world gave them 18 years ago.

Q24 Lord Grocott: Sir Richard, many thanks for your evidence so far. I now turn attention specifically towards the UK and the lessons, successes and shortcomings of our involvement over 20-odd years. You have touched on this quite a bit in your previous answers. You mentioned, for example, that we made the mistake of seeing the Taliban as more of a group of fanatics and less as representing some sort of constituency. You have also touched on some of Britain's successes. Could I ask you to focus specifically now on strengths and weaknesses, particularly since the combat operations ended?

Sir Richard Stagg: There are big successes that we have achieved. Looking at healthcare, education and the media, many things are now much better. Girls' education has been transformed from nothing to, in parts of the country, a very impressive system. We all went into Afghanistan with a limited understanding of what we were intending to achieve beyond removing the Taliban and the threat of further attacks from al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden against the West. When the military operations proved so rapid, we were all left in the position where we had

to try to determine what happened next. It was a process where we probably made as many wrong judgments as right judgments along the way, and I am happy to talk more about that because that was when I was there.

Since the end of major military operations in 2014, we have had a sensible goal of trying to provide limited military help to the government to ensure that they could sustain themselves. If we had not had US and UK support for the Ashraf Ghani government in the security area, it is very likely that they would have been unable to achieve a military stalemate, which has led to the current talks. We have tried to focus more on development co-operation and assistance.

The latter has been very difficult to deliver effectively in a country where security is so poor and the writ of the central government does not run in many parts of the country. We cannot have in Afghanistan the sort of partnership that we might have with the government in a more stable country, where we work with them to deliver improvements in healthcare, sanitation, education and so on.

I suspect that we probably underestimated throughout, or certainly for the last decade, the difficulty, if not impossibility, of using our taxpayers' money really effectively in that environment. I say this, because for the last five years I have been the chairman of a charity in Afghanistan that delivers education in one district in north-eastern Afghanistan. Because we have been there for a long time, we know the people and we have the support of the local community. We are delivering things that they want, so when we build a school, they look after it because they want it. When we provide help for girls' education, it works because they want it, and it is sustained. Trying to do this through the national government, when they are not very strong and perceived by many Afghans to be corrupt, is very challenging.

We should probably pause and think quite carefully about whether we can achieve our ambitions or whether we need to recalibrate them to reflect the realities in Afghanistan. That might be sad, but it is better to do that. When I was there, we paid teachers' salaries, for example. I can promise you that we were paying the money to tens of thousands of different bank accounts; the money was probably going to different people. Whether they were all teachers, I am not entirely sure. Whether they went to school, I am entirely unsure. Whether they taught the national curriculum or Wahhabi Islam, I have no idea. Our focus since 2014 or 2015 has been right, as I understand it. The military component was essential. The development one has been more difficult to deliver.

Q25 Lord Purvis of Tweed: Good morning. Thank you for that very frank assessment. It was really interesting. I will ask you to build on it and to reflect on the areas where you said that perhaps some wrong judgments were made. My question is about looking to the future and, in effect, how we do not repeat the mistakes of the past.

We received a written briefing by the FCDO, which said that its ODA

budget in 2019 for Afghanistan was £214 million. That does not quite reconcile with the link to its website, which suggests it is £155 million, but I will pursue that. Of that, £100 million of ODA from DfID goes to the World Bank for the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, £20 million to multilateral humanitarian support and only £13 million bilaterally, directly for education.

It seems as if the vast bulk of our support is simply a key contributor to international funds rather than a direct UK presence. What are the main practical deliverables on which we, specifically as the UK, can make an impact over the next five to 10 years?

Sir Richard Stagg: It is a very good question. For at least the last decade, the bulk of our money has tended to go through large multilateral programmes run by the UN or the World Bank. As I already said, the problem with these programmes is that the Afghan government, their principal partner, have limited capacity and limited reach. Inevitably, given the history of Afghanistan, the quality of the people in the government is very varied. We should be pondering how we can use this money more effectively.

I see two ways ahead. One is supporting charities, principally UK ones, that operate on the ground in Afghanistan, have been there for many years and have earned a degree of respect and credibility with the population. Some charities have worked there since the time of the Soviet jihad and through the ups and downs of the political system in Kabul. With these sorts of people, you get a sustainable ability to deliver.

My worry about much of this is that, even if it seems quite good on day one, you go back in five years' time and find that the school you built is crumbling and no one is there. I cannot remember exactly what the acronym SIGAR stands for, but it is the American who inspects US aid projects in Afghanistan. I think he is called the controller-general for Afghanistan reconstruction. There are numerous reports about how things have been done, built and constructed, but because there was no real local interest or engagement they just gradually decline and collapse. It can be infrastructure, buildings or social projects. Getting the local community's interest and engagement is essential if you are to keep things going over time.

The second thing is to focus on areas of UK natural advantage. I am not an expert on ODA, but we do some very good work in training the Afghan special forces, which is not ODA, and in helping to train future officers in the Afghan army. I do not know whether that is ODA, but it is certainly helping to create an army led by people with a sense of purpose and standards that are not necessarily typical of historical Afghan armies. I would say that it has a wider benefit than merely a military one, although I am not an expert.

Another area might be looking at media freedom and trying to ensure that there is a vibrant media in Afghanistan to underpin a genuinely pluralist political system. We need to think of things in which we have an

advantage vis-à-vis others and which we can deliver. Pouring money into the top of the Afghan government machine will do some good but probably not as much as we would hope.

- Q26 **The Chair:** Sir Richard, there is one player on the international scene that we have not referred to yet, which is Russia. Could you comment, please, on the role of Russia in Afghanistan and particularly in the Doha negotiation process?

Sir Richard Stagg: Yes. I used to be a great friend of the Russian Ambassador throughout my time there and played tennis with him once a week. Then I knew a bit about what the Russians were up to, but now I am much less expert. The Russian view of their role, and indeed the Afghan view of their role, has evolved quite a lot in the last five or six years. Inevitably, for much of the time after 1988 to 1989, the Russians were in a very weak position, because they were seen as having invaded and then occupied Afghanistan and undertaken a pretty brutal campaign of force to try to make Afghanistan in effect a Russian colony.

In the Putin era, and particularly in the last five years, they have probably played a more sophisticated game of trying to show that they were engaged with both the government and the Taliban. They would claim that they have been one of the factors that helped get the Doha talks going. I would not be able to comment on the accuracy of that claim, but I think they would claim that. They see Afghanistan as being on the edge of the near abroad, as they view it, and therefore a country over whose future they have a legitimate degree of oversight.

The fundamentals of the relationship are still pretty difficult, because even under the present constitution it is an Islamic republic. History has not gone away; it is quite recent history by comparison with other problems featuring in the media at the moment. The Russians are probably playing more of a tactical game. They do not have a long-term strategic desire to bring Afghanistan back into the fold but, not dissimilar to China, they want to ensure that there is no instability and difficulty on their borders. Many Russians define their borders more broadly than a map of political central Asia would suggest.

From their perspective, they would now accept that a stable government needs to involve the Taliban in some sense, because the cause of the conflict for the last 20 years has been the Taliban. They have probably played a bit of a role, but I suspect rather less than they would like to suggest. I am not, as I say, the greatest expert on the most recent history.

- Q27 **Baroness Fall:** Thank you very much, Sir Richard. One of the critical issues in the talks is prisoner release. I wondered whether you might offer your views on that, particularly in relation to the difficult issue of drugs in Afghanistan and the suggestions we read in the press that this has a big effect on drugs supply in this country.

Sir Richard Stagg: Quite large-scale prisoner release has already happened, focused on those involved in the conflict, with the Afghan

government releasing members of the Taliban who have been detained and imprisoned, and the Taliban releasing former members of the armed forces who have been captured on the battlefield—"battlefield" being very broadly defined.

The drugs problem is a very complicated one. Most people in Afghanistan view it as a demand problem, not a supply problem, in that there is a drug trade in Afghanistan because people elsewhere want to use the commodity. It is very difficult to control the supply. When I was there, typically a farmer got 10 times more revenue from opium than from wheat, and employed five times as many people because harvesting opium is very labour intensive. If you were a farmer in Helmand, a major opium-producing province, and you were not particularly worried about what was going on in Bradford or Manchester, it was a bit of a no-brainer, as the Americans would say, to produce opium and not wheat.

How you change this requires quite a lot of complicated interventions, which we made a big effort with, but never really succeeded in. As the conflict wore on, livelihoods became more difficult and the economy went downhill. Therefore, the attraction of a relatively quick-earning opium harvest increased, so the fundamentals were moving against what the British government were trying to achieve. For the Afghan government, despite the fact that there was growing addiction in Afghanistan itself, this still looked like a third-order problem compared to the civil insurgency and the war with the Taliban that they were facing.

To tackle this, you need, first, to persuade the government of Afghanistan of its importance to them and, secondly, to devise a strategy that reduces the economic attractiveness of producing opium, given the lack of effective central control and the limit of policing. Helmand is a barren desert with not much going on except for pockets of production of agricultural goods of various sorts. It is a very difficult world to police. You need to change attitudes and minds first and then devise a long-term strategy to build on that.

It is possible to argue, although I do not want to get too euphoric, that if you had a settlement between the existing government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, that might provide a basis on which to devise a more effective strategy to tackle the opium problem.

Q28 Lord Alton of Liverpool: Sir Richard, yesterday there was a Private Notice Question in the House of Lords about interpreters. It specifically asked about the position of interpreters who had fled to third countries because of their fear of attacks by the Taliban at the time. They will not qualify under the new scheme for assistance, although the extension of the scheme is nevertheless welcome. I wonder if you have a view about the position of interpreters, and other civilians who aided the Crown during that period and have not been given resettlement rights or assistance here.

Can I ask you about the decision of the United States to impose sanctions on the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court and any

impact that will have on its ability to continue conducting its inquiry into Afghanistan?

Sir Richard Stagg: I am very conscious of the point about interpreters. I had working for me in Kabul someone who lost both legs and one arm when working as an interpreter for us in Helmand, and I had to produce a written statement as to why he should be offered the chance to live in the UK. He is now living in Colchester. I strongly believe that we have a moral obligation to these people. Most people who have worked and lived in Afghanistan for the British government would share it.

From my personal perspective, we should veer on the side of generosity. We are not faced with a huge wall of Afghan migrants because of the interpreters. They are a small group of people who, as you say, worked for us in circumstances of huge personal difficulty and mostly with great courage and commitment. While I am not in charge of the policy in this area, I would be a supporter of being more rather than less generous and, where there are doubts at the margin, saying yes to people rather than no.

I was not aware, to be honest, of the particular problem of those in third countries. I suppose it depends on which third country they are in. If it is a country where they can live and work happily, or survive happily, there is no great reason for us to get involved. If it is a country where they are in transit rather than in residence, we should look on their cases with great sympathy and humanity, because they made choices for us that we benefited from greatly at the time and we should acknowledge that.

On the International Criminal Court, I really am out of my depth. I should be honest with you.

Q29 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** I wanted to follow up on something that was said in the earlier evidence about the desirability of a post-settlement Afghanistan being more decentralised and less on the basis that was followed at the Bonn talks. Does this mean an overall rewrite of the Afghan constitution, which could be pretty tricky to do, or does it mean simply practising within the framework of the existing constitution but in a rather different way?

Sir Richard Stagg: I very much meant the second. As you imply, whatever its defects, trying to revisit the Bonn constitution and recraft it in a new shape would be a very complicated and controversial activity. To my mind, if you look at the history of the Afghan monarchy, the norm was a relatively decentralised or light-touch central government. There were periods, particularly at the end of the 19th century, when the emir tried to assert more control.

To my mind, it is the way in which the government operate and use the constitution, rather than a change. It is in the hands of Ashraf Ghani, Abdullah Abdullah and the Taliban, but trying to reorganise the constitution from its current shape and structure would be a very long, laborious and unpredictable process, whereas you can imagine an understanding, possibly in writing, about the interpretation of the

constitution that would provide a degree of reassurance on all sides. It could be a way of reassuring those who fear the return of the Taliban and fear the reforms of the last two decades being rolled back and a return to the untrammelled Taliban rule of the late 1990s. It could also be a reassurance that, in parts of the Pashtun heartland in the south and east—Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan and so on—societies would be able to operate more as they have historically.

The Chair: Sir Richard, thank you very much indeed for your contribution this morning. We appreciate that we are embarked upon an ambitious effort with regard to our inquiry into the UK and Afghanistan. It is against a background that colleagues realise the importance of the country, not just now but over the decades. Of course, the launch just last week of the discussions in Doha brings it into greater focus. It is perhaps disappointing that parliamentarians across both Houses in Westminster have not paid enough attention to Afghanistan over the last decades.

We are very glad to be able to draw upon people with such experience as yours. It will inform us and we plan to be in a position to publish our report very early in the new year. Thank you very much indeed.