



House of Commons
Defence Committee

Decision-making in Defence Policy

Eleventh Report of Session 2014–15

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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The Defence Committee

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Summary

The British military has an unrivalled global reputation. The nation is justifiably proud of the courage, skills, and dedication of its personnel. But our service personnel have not always been well served by the decisions made by politicians and military leaders. Poor decision-making can cost lives and vast sums of public money. It is absolutely imperative, therefore, that the MoD gets the right information, the right structures, the right processes, and the right people to make the best decisions.

We pay tribute to the senior officers, civil servants, and politicians, who are forced to operate in an increasingly complex strategic environment. The Levene Reforms, and the National Security Council have brought clearer accountability to decision-making, and reinforced civilian control, but they have not addressed historical gaps in information, training, openness to criticism, and strategic thought.

In Afghanistan in 2005, for example, a risky decision was made to take responsibility for Helmand Province, and then in 2006 to deploy troops to isolated platoon positions in the North of the Province. Decision-makers grossly underestimated the scale of Taliban resistance, leaving the soldiers in a dangerously exposed positions. A province, which the decision-makers initially proposed to control with just over 3,000 British soldiers, ultimately proved to require the presence of 32,000 British and American soldiers,¹ and 32,000 Afghan troops.

In 1998, to cite another example, a decision was made to configure the carriers for STOVL jets, although they could carry fewer weapons, less fuel, would require dramatic reinforcement of the deck, and meant that the carriers could not take French jets. In 2010, the MoD tried to reverse this decision, before concluding two years later, that it was too late in the process, to be able to afford to change the decision.

In both cases, the MoD seemed to have been poorly informed and misunderstood the nature of the problem. Those responsible do not seem to have sought the right expert advice, or if they did, ignored it. There does not seem to have been a healthy culture of challenge. In both cases, no-one has admitted to actually taking the decision. In the case of Helmand, in evidence given to the Committee in 2011, successive Secretaries of State insisted they had not made the decision. Meanwhile, everyone from the Brigadier on the ground, to the Generals and policy staff in London, appear to disagree about who was actually responsible in the first place.

In both cases, the structure of decision-making was bewildering. One Secretary of State claimed that he was not aware of being in the chain of command. Some civilians seemed uncomfortable challenging military advice. There was little sense of any long-term strategy underpinning the decisions. All this seems to have created a system which struggled to establish and prioritise their objectives, evaluate alternatives, or manage the risks of a

1 ["The remnants of a foreign policy"](#), The Economist, 11 October 2014

decision. Immensely important and costly decisions appear to have had remarkably uncertain foundations.

The Government has since been relatively frank in conceding that there were serious problems in MoD decision-making. The Secretary of State, Rt Hon Michael Fallon, for example, has said that the Government was “not being properly recorded or prepared and was all very loose and haphazard”.² But—because of two key changes since 2010: the introduction of the National Security Council and the Levene reforms—the MoD argues decision-making problems are now a thing of the past.

Lord Levene’s reforms sought to address—among other things—irrational optimism, the lack of long-term strategy, and the absence of clear accountability, in MoD decision-making. It introduced new structures, which made the Chiefs of the Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force able to focus more on the administration of their budgets and arms, coordinated them through a joint-forces command, and left the responsibility for strategy increasingly to the Chief of the Defence Staff.

The National Security Council sought to provide a formal setting, to facilitate interdepartmental coordination on strategy. The most senior members of the cabinet were now kept informed of Defence and Security issues, and the Prime-minister would be in a position to make the ultimate decisions. The new structure, the level of interdepartmental coordination, clearer leadership, clearer accountability, clearer civilian control, and clearer opportunity for challenge, were all in our view substantial improvements on the old decision-making systems.

But significant problems were still not addressed by these new structures. The first of these is the continuing lack of deep-country or subject expertise, and therefore, the lack of high-quality information or evidence available to the decision-makers. We are not convinced that decision-makers today are necessarily better-informed than they were in Helmand, or when making decisions about the carriers. Nor that there has been a significant improvement in their skills, experience, knowledge, awareness of historical precedents, or in their strategic imagination. This is particularly striking in military affairs, where the removal of the Chiefs from strategic discussions limits the scope for expert military advice and debate, and puts exclusive responsibility on the Chief of the Defence Staff (who has no command responsibilities) to represent the military view. We believe that this should be addressed by re-engaging the Chiefs of Staff Committee in strategy formulation by incorporating it in the National Security Council as its military sub-committee. We also believe that an appropriate degree of subject specialisation, as well as management skill, should be restored as a requirement for the Civil Service.

More needs to be done to educate the key decision-makers better, and train them to think and act more strategically. The NSC itself does not seem to be adequately staffed, or resourced to provide deep expertise or challenge. The tone, and time-limits of the meetings, did not seem to provide the right environment in which to accurately define

problems, prioritise objectives, evaluate alternatives, or manage the risk of tentative decisions. Its implementation capacity is weak. It appears still to struggle to incorporate expertise or critical viewpoints. And too often it seems to be functioning more as a crisis response centre, rather than a body formulating strategy and looking ahead.

There is no 'quick-fix' for any of these problems. Even the best individuals, provided with the highest quality information, and embedded in the best structures with the best processes, struggle to make consistently good decisions. The complexity of the threats which the UK faces is extreme. So too is the complexity of the technology now required to support the military. Decisions in major programmes often have to be made twenty years in advance, in the knowledge that the world will change, and that the individuals making the decisions will often be long gone before they can be evaluated. The daily pressures on politicians are intense. The UK is frequently operating under extreme resource constraints, and is forced to operate in coalition with other countries, with different traditions, and strategies to its own. These are problems that have beset all governments, from different political parties for many decades. And this is certainly not intended as a criticism of a particular government or individual. But the clearer chains of accountability introduced by the NSC and the Levene Reforms, though necessary, are still insufficient. They must be reinforced with a deep change in the culture of government.

We now face an astonishing variety of threats. These potentially include the first confrontation with an advanced military nation—Russia—since the end of the Cold War. We need to come to terms with new asymmetric and ambiguous warfare methods, stretching from cyber to information operations. We need to prepare for new threats such as Electro-Magnetic Pulses, and new capabilities such as RPAs. We need to do so in a new legal environment with an evolving industrial strategy, at a time when the public often appears sceptical of using the military. And we are facing threats, at the time of writing, not simply in Afghanistan, but also in Northern Nigeria, Libya, the Sahel, Yemen, Syria, Iraq and potentially the Baltic. Responding to such modern crises requires more not less historical and cultural understanding, greater emphasis on strategic expertise, deeper efforts of analysis and lesson learning, more openness to challenge, more clarity, more imagination, and more courage. This will require continuing reassessment and reforms in the decision-making structures of the Ministry of Defence and the National Security Council. We have been lucky enough to inherit the finest military in the world. We owe them the right decisions.

1 Introduction

The inquiry

1. In July 2014, we decided to conduct an inquiry into decision-making in defence policy, including an examination of the relationships between Ministers, officials and the military. We set out to understand the current state of decision-making processes within the MoD, and to assess whether changes needed to be made.

2. The inquiry was framed in the following terms:³

- What are the processes for decision-making in Defence policy? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these processes?
- How is the relationship between Ministers and their advisers, the military and civil servants defined?
- How have processes for decision-making and the relationship between Ministers and their advisers, the military and civil servants changed over the last 10 years?
- Is there a case for codifying the relationship?
- What pressures have been placed on this relationship in the last 10 years by changes in the Government's relations with the media?
- What effect has the House of Commons vote on intervention in Syria had on this relationship?
- Who makes the decisions on the deployment of UK troops on combat and other operations?

3. We received six written submissions, and held six oral evidence sessions, with 11 panels. We decided to investigate defence decision-making by investigating two case studies: firstly, the decision to deploy forces to Helmand Province in Afghanistan in 2006, and the deployment into Northern Helmand later in 2006; and secondly, decisions surrounding the aircraft carriers, procured by the MoD to replace the three Invincible class carriers. The first, second and fourth evidence sessions focused on decision-making in Afghanistan, whilst the third session looked at decisions about the design of the aircraft carriers in 1998 and 2010.

4. During our evidence sessions, it became evident that the National Security Council ('NSC') was being posited as a way of counteracting the weaknesses that had plagued defence decision-making, and we decided, therefore, that our fifth session would focus on the effectiveness of the NSC. We took evidence from two former members of the NSC, who were able to provide us with first-hand accounts of the inner workings of this

3 Defence Committee, [Terms of Reference](#), 16 September 2014

relatively new decision-making structure. We also discussed the impact of the 2011 Levene reforms, with a particular focus on the impact on the Chiefs of Staff. During the sixth and final evidence session, we took evidence from the Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, Vice Chief of Defence Staff, and Peter Watkins, Director General Security Policy. We would like to thank all the contributors to this inquiry, and emphasise that their time, effort and expertise were very much appreciated.

5. For the purpose of clarity, we shall use the following definitions of the levels of defence decision-making:⁴

- ‘Grand Strategic’—the responsibility of Her Majesty’s Government—is the national political level that sets the government policy on international issues, in effect national aims in peace and war that strategy is to deliver.
- ‘Military Strategic’—the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence—is the highest military level, developing, sustaining and assigning military forces to support government policy and achieve goals set at the Grand Strategic level.
- ‘Operational’—the responsibility of the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ)—planning military campaigns and deploying forces to achieve the strategic objectives set by the MoD.
- ‘Tactical’—the responsibility of Field Commanders or Component Commanders—directing operations on the ground, at sea and in the air.
- The United Kingdom recently replaced the term ‘Grand Strategy’ with ‘National Strategy’, defining it as National Strategy directs the coordinated application of the instruments of national power (diplomatic, economic and military) in the pursuit of national policy aspirations.

4 Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, The Royal College of Defence Studies, [Thinking Strategically](#), October 2010, p 7

2 Case Studies

Decision-making in Helmand

6. There is perhaps no clearer recent example of the problems of decision-making in the Ministry of Defence, than the decision to move British troops to Helmand in Afghanistan in April 2006, and then, subsequently, into Northern Helmand in May 2006.

7. Over the winter of 2005–2006 a decision was made to give British troops the responsibility for Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan. Then, at the request of the new provincial governor, Governor Daoud, the British agreed to establish small ‘platoon houses’ in the Northern areas of Helmand. The initial objective of the deployment was to focus on re-establishing good governance, and eliminating the growth of opium poppies. The fundamental threat in Helmand was then believed to come from corrupt government, and from narcotics traffickers.⁵ There was not then believed to be a significant Taliban threat to British forces.⁶

8. Very rapidly, however, the British troops found themselves under heavy attack. In early July, the Taliban surrounded the position of Sangin, killing eleven British soldiers, and requiring an airlift of 200 paratroopers, supported by the United States and Canadian forces to relieve the position.⁷ In early August, Musa Qala was surrounded and came under intensive fire at close range, and again needed to be relieved with heavy forces.⁸ By mid-October, according to Brigadier Ed Butler, Musa Qala was 36-hours from being abandoned.⁹ With increasing evidence that the platoon house strategy was unsustainable, a temporary cease-fire was negotiated. At the same time the Ministry of Defence conceded that they had not anticipated the intensity of Taliban resistance.¹⁰ Troop numbers, which were initially intended to be 3,000 were increased to 7,700, and reinforced with more heavy equipment. In the words of Desmond Bowen, then Director of Policy Planning at the Ministry of Defence, “things should have happened that did not happen”.¹¹

9. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that the British should not have deployed to isolated platoon houses in Northern Helmand, in the face of a Taliban insurgency. They should not have believed that the task in Helmand would primarily be a question of governance and reconstruction. They should have seen the threat from the criminal, tribal and religious politics of the Province. So what went wrong?

5 [“UK’s original Helmand deployment plan examined,”](#) The BBC, 22 June 2011

6 Defence Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2010–12, [Operations in Afghanistan](#), HC 554, para 33, para 36

7 [“UK troops take Taleban stronghold,”](#) The BBC, 16 July 2006

8 [“Siege of Sangin crushed,”](#) The Scotsman, 17 July 2006

9 [“Paras almost retreated under Taliban assault,”](#) The Telegraph, 02 October 2006

10 Defence Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2010–12, [Operations in Afghanistan](#), HC 554, para 33, para 35, para 36

11 [Q69](#)

Expertise, knowledge and intelligence

10. It is clear, first, that the British Government was insufficiently well-informed about the dangers posed by Helmand. Instead, there was a general consensus that the British troops would be relatively popular with the local population, that their major tasks would be in reconstruction, and that they would not face an intense insurgency. Brigadier (retired) Ed Butler, who commanded the British Forces in Helmand, at the time of the deployment, neatly encapsulated these assumptions, when he expressed surprise at “quite how violent” the reaction was from the Taliban to British forces.¹²

11. As well as underestimating the numbers, resources and determination of the Taliban, the British government also underestimated the deep financial links, family connections, support from the Kabul government, narcotic networks, and patronage and criminal base of the major power-players in Helmand, including the recently ousted governor Sher Muhammed Akhuzade.¹³ In short, British understanding of Helmandi tribal and religious structures, power networks, crime, culture and politics, was inadequate.

12. This reflected the lack of focus on deep-country knowledge among British diplomats, intelligence officers, and the military. Officials had spent almost no time living amongst Afghan rural communities, did not speak Pushtu, and had only a superficial understanding of Helmand’s families, culture and history. Our witnesses have stated that intelligence from Afghanistan was “badly flawed”, and that “high quality intelligence” was not received from Helmand province.¹⁴

13. The lack of expertise on the ground was paralleled by a real absence of expertise in London. Whereas, nineteenth century reforms had required that a majority of the Indian office in London consisted of people who had served in India for at least a decade, the Afghan section of the Foreign Office in London, as late as 2010, included no-one who had actually served on a posting in Afghanistan.

14. This lack of deep-country understanding extended throughout the senior ranks of the military, and to politicians. Dr Kim Howells, former Minister at the Foreign Office, emphasised that in order to acquire any “on ground” exposure to the situation in Afghanistan, he had to circumvent the British government system and hitch a ride on a US plane to Helmand.¹⁵ His brief exposure to the situation in Helmand was he thought greater than that of other leading decision-makers.¹⁶ It left him deeply worried by the situation on the ground, but he was unable to find a hearing.¹⁷

12 [Q29](#)

13 For example, oral evidence take on 15 March 2011, HC (2010–12) 554, [Q472–3](#) [Brigadier Butler]

14 [Q79](#) [Dr Kim Howells]

15 [Q76](#) [Dr Kim Howells]

16 [Q76, Q80, Q83, Q94](#)

17 [Q76, Q83, Q116](#)

15. The lack of intelligence that political leaders were using to make key decisions in relation to Afghanistan was noted by commentators.¹⁸ Adam Holloway, a Member of Parliament, and former member of the Defence Committee, voiced his frustrations, saying in a speech in the House:

Only about two years ago, after I had given a presentation to the National Security Council, an immensely senior person in our Government took me aside and said, “Adam, are you really saying that the Taliban aren’t a threat to the UK?” That revealed the most fundamental misunderstanding of the difference between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. It almost beggars belief.¹⁹

16. More generally, it was observed that Ministers lacked not simply knowledge about Afghanistan, but also “briefing on the military aspects of their jobs”.²⁰

Ability to challenge

17. In so far as there were critical voices willing to challenge the conventional wisdom and emphasise the risks in Helmand (whether from Special Forces reconnaissance, or from country experts), they were suppressed.²¹ Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles recalled being told not to report American criticism of the British army to London “because it upsets the MoD”.²²

18. Dr Kim Howells was not convinced that “much intelligence [was being]...passed back and forth between Departments, or even sometimes within Departments”, and suggested that in some cases it may have been “ignored”.²³ Brigadier Butler added that “human failings” had led to leaders failing to understand or recognise the importance of intelligence that was available.²⁴ And he added “What happened to that intelligence, and why it did not feed into the various Government Departments, I am not sure, and I find that is a major shortcoming”.²⁵

19. This was exacerbated by the unshakeable optimism—at least publicly—from every successive commander that they had the resources, and plan to achieve a ‘decisive’ impact in Helmand.²⁶ Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, reported never experiencing a “negative briefing” about what was being achieved in Afghanistan.²⁷ This amounted, in Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles’ words, to a “massive act of collective self-deception”.²⁸

18 29 Jan 2015: [col 1074](#) [Adam Holloway]

19 29 Jan 2015: [col 1074](#) [Adam Holloway]

20 [Q23](#)

21 [Q29](#) [Brigadier Butler], [Q3](#) [Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles]

22 [Q3](#)

23 [Q77](#), [Q102](#)

24 [Q31](#)

25 [Q29](#)

26 “[Generals ‘misled’ ministers on progress in Afghanistan](#)”, The Daily Mail, 10 November 2010

27 [Q11](#)

28 [Q24](#)

We all wanted to believe that it was working; we wanted to please Ministers, the armed forces and the Americans. There is nothing new about this; the same thing happened in the early years of the Vietnam war, when the best and brightest round John F. Kennedy knew that the American strategy in South Vietnam couldn't work and wouldn't work; but they used the phrase that we used ourselves in Afghanistan: "Progress is being made, but challenges remain." It was wishful thinking, rather than some massive conspiracy.²⁹

20. Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles reported that members of the Government in 2006 were "in awe of the generals and military",³⁰ and that the Afghan campaign lacked a balance between strong Ministers and strong advisers, both civilian and military.³¹ He therefore suggests that there may have been, on occasion, an absence of confidence amongst ministers in particular, to challenge the military advice, and ensure they receive "the wider picture".³²

21. Lieutenant General (retired) Sir Robert Fry told us about a document entitled "Why Helmand", produced by the MoD, which suggests that analysis of decisions made did take place.³³ However, we are unable to confirm this analysis, since the MoD were unable to provide the "Why Helmand" paper.

22. Finally, there was a general assumption that the overall decision to deploy had already been made, and it was too late to question it. Dr Kim Howells reported feeling as if he was "nit-picking, rather than being part of some great process of decision-making", when he challenged the decisions that were being implemented.³⁴ This may in part have reflected a sense that the UK was simply part of "a larger American war effort", and there was the feeling at the time that the UK needed to be loyal to their "most important ally".³⁵ Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles said that political leaders need to "empower" advisers to offer "honest", "objective" advice that "may not always be welcome".³⁶

Long-term thinking, including a focus on strategy

23. Intelligence and assessment of the mission aside, the overall objective of the mission remained strikingly vague:

to conduct security and stabilisation operations within Helmand and wider Regional Command South, jointly with Afghan partners, other Government

29 [Q24](#) [Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles]

30 [Q5](#)

31 [Q11](#)

32 [Q9](#)

33 [Q52](#) [Lieutenant General (retired) Sir Robert Fry]

34 [Q85](#)

35 [Q4](#)

36 [Q15](#)

departments and multinational partners, in order to support the Government of Afghanistan, governance and development objectives.³⁷

24. This remained true of future iterations of the strategy, including that of 2009, which was defined as:

International [...] regional [...] joint civilian-military [...] co-ordinated [...] long-term [...] focused on developing capacity [...] an approach that combines respect for sovereignty and local values with respect for international standards of democracy, legitimate and accountable government, and human rights; a hard-headed approach: setting clear and realistic objectives with clear metrics of success.³⁸

And which appeared to be not so much a plan for what to do, as a description of what we lacked. Pauline Hayes, former Head of Office in Afghanistan 2010–12, Department for International Development, told us that “in Afghanistan everything we do is [...] driven by an NSC strategy for Afghanistan”, and yet despite this, she went on to tell us that “First and foremost, I discuss with the Afghans, because what we do should be guided by their priorities, strategies and so on, but then we will talk to the US, the EU and other bilaterals such as the UN, the World Bank and the IMF. We have to work in tandem to deliver in Afghanistan.” By its own admission, DFID told us that it prioritises the views of others over that of the UK strategy. Where strategy exists, it appeared to be relegated to low priority.

25. This failed to provide any sensible framework for assessing the risks, costs, benefits, or objectives of the mission. Brigadier Butler argued that the UK needed to be “much more business-like in how we get into some of these significant strategic operations and campaigns and actually cost it”.³⁹ He said that “there was no clarity about what our strategic objectives were; and there was no real definition of what success or failure might look like”.⁴⁰ Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles questioned “where is the strategy—what is the outcome we’re hoping to deliver in the long run”?⁴¹ He believed that the UK suffered from “confusion” about the overall aim of the mission.⁴² Brigadier Butler believed that by taking a realistic long-term view of the real costs in lives and resources of the deployment to Northern Helmand, the UK might have avoided the “self-deception” that there could have been some sort of success.⁴³

37 [Q32](#)

38 Cabinet Office, [UK policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan: the way forward](#), April 2009, p14

39 [Q35](#)

40 [Q26](#)

41 [Q2](#)

42 [Q55](#)

43 [Q49](#) [Brigadier Butler]

Accountability and responsibility, including evidence of an auditable trail for decisions made

26. The vagueness of the strategy was reflected in the lack of clarity about why Britain was deploying to Helmand in the first place, rather than to Kandahar (like the Canadians), and rather than continuing the constructive work which British forces had been undertaking in the more permissive environment of Mazar-e-Sharif. In the words of Dr Kim Howells, then the Minister responsible for Afghanistan:

I was told that we were going to Helmand. I asked why, but no one seemed to know. The usual answer was that the Canadians had got Kandahar first. It seemed a bit haphazard really.⁴⁴

27. Military witnesses insisted that both ministers and the chain of command were kept well-informed of the decision both to go to Helmand, and specifically the decision to deploy to Northern Helmand. Brigadier Butler argued that “anyone who says that they were not aware either military or politically is, I would say, incorrect”.⁴⁵ He explained that information was passed right through the chain of command to Ministers. He personally briefed incumbent ministers when they visited theatre.⁴⁶ He told us that information was being passed “upwards and downwards on a daily basis” and that he “wrote weekly reports and spoke pretty well every other day to PJHQ at two-star general level” as well as sitting in “weekly conferences”. Lieutenant General (retired) Sir Robert Fry thought it inconceivable that Ministers were not briefed on a matter of such significance.⁴⁷

28. But senior figures appear not to have recognised the significance of such briefings, or to be aware that they were being called upon to make an important decision. Desmond Bowen suggested that an important strategic decision may have been perceived as simply tactical:

My view is that the decision to move and effectively change the task to create platoon houses was taken at a tactical level but was actually a strategic decision. Whether that was briefed up the line and at some stage someone cut it off or whether, actually, it was not briefed up the line because it seemed like a decision for mission command and the local commander, I do not know. It is a really difficult question. It is the Rumsfeld point about, “Stuff happens”. It is a question of someone actually clocking that the stuff happening is of strategic importance and is not just about tactical decisions.⁴⁸

29. Both Secretaries of State for Defence in post during that period, denied having made the decision to deploy to Northern Helmand—or even being aware that a decision had been made. The decision must have been made some time before 26 May 2006, when the first

44 [Q76](#)

45 [Q41](#)

46 [Q34](#)

47 [Q58](#)

48 [Q58](#)

British troops arrived in their platoon houses. After May 6, the Secretary of State was Lord Browne, but he asserts that the decision had been taken before he arrived at the Department—in other words under Lord Reid’s tenure in office. Lord Reid, however, claims never to have given the sign-off to move into Northern Helmand. In fact he claims, that under his office, there was strong resistance to the move:

Just prior to me leaving the MoD, I recall being briefed that, while Permanent Joint Headquarters regarded Governor Daoud, the Governor of Helmand Province, as an honest man, he needed to be strongly discouraged from making gestures—for example, the idea of a forward operating base at Sangin—that were unsustainable. Not long after this, I left the MoD for the Home Office. You can imagine that when, five weeks later, sitting in the Home Office, I heard that we were fighting for our lives in Sangin, I could not entirely understand it. I understand from inquiries that I made then and subsequently that the matter was not referred to the Secretary of State for Defence who succeeded me. It was never brought to his attention, except in retrospect.⁴⁹

30. All this clearly indicated at the very least, a “tangled” chain of command,⁵⁰ in which responsibility appeared to have been a vague and unregulated concept. As Desmond Bowen, former Director General of Policy, Ministry of Defence, has pointed out “someone somewhere” should have been asking the key questions about operations in Helmand.⁵¹ And yet, this appears not to have been happening.

Structure

31. More generally, there seems to have been no clarity over who was in charge. Desmond Bowen tried to argue that meetings “involving all the different departments” took place, and that there was a “very deliberate process” in place.⁵² Major-General Chris Elliott, however, suggested that many of the important decisions had been made privately between then Prime Minister, Rt Hon Tony Blair and his successive Chiefs of Defence staff.⁵³ Dr Kim Howells, then Minister of State in the Foreign Office with responsibility for Afghanistan, said he was unable to “interfere” in decisions,⁵⁴ which would be taken at very high levels. Lord Reid, Secretary of State for Defence in 2006 said that: “it is not the job of the Secretary of State to start deciding military operations”.⁵⁵ Lord Browne told us that: “I was never briefed that I was part of the chain of command, and I never considered myself to be part of the chain of command”.⁵⁶ All this confirmed the statement by Lieutenant

49 Oral evidence taken on [8 February 2011](#), HC (2010–12) 554, Q415 [Lord Reid]

50 [Q76](#) [Dr Kim Howells]

51 [Q62](#)

52 [Q53](#)

53 [Q77](#) [Dr Kim Howells]; Christopher L Elliott, *High Command*, (London 2015), p 218

54 [Q101](#)

55 Oral evidence taken on [8 February 2011](#), HC (2010–12) 554, Q421 [Lord Reid]

56 Oral evidence taken on [29 March 2011](#), HC (2010–12) 554, Q557 [Lord Browne]

General (retired) Sir Robert Fry that “dialogue across Whitehall [...] didn’t have any fundamental discipline or structure about it”.⁵⁷

Decision-making and the Carriers

32. Similar problems in MoD decision-making appear to have been present in the Carrier decisions.

1998 decisions around the carriers

33. The three Invincible class aircraft carriers, HMS Invincible, HMS Illustrious and HMS Ark Royal, were due to be decommissioned in the early 2000s. In the 1998 Security and Defence Review (SDR),⁵⁸ the decision was taken to replace them with two larger aircraft carriers, the ‘Queen Elizabeth’ and the ‘Prince of Wales’, capable of carrying a more powerful aircraft.⁵⁹ In 1998, the decision was taken not to fit the aircraft with catapult and arrestor gear (‘cats and traps’) to take the carrier variant (CV) of the Joint Strike Fighter—even though this would have allowed greater interoperability with the French. Instead a decision was made to select the STOVL (Short Take Off/ Vertical Landing) variant of the joint strike fighter, which required a reinforced deck to be installed on the carrier.⁶⁰

2010 and 2012 decisions with the carriers

34. In the 2010 Strategic Defence and Strategic Review (SDSR), the decision was reversed.⁶¹ Liam Fox MP, the incoming Secretary of State for Defence, decided to change the carrier design from the STOVL option back to the carrier variant of Joint Strike Fighter and install the EMAL⁶² system of cat and trap technology. (At the same time a decision was made to hold only one carrier in operational readiness, whilst placing the other carrier in “storage”).⁶³

35. In 2012, the decision was reversed again, changing back from the carrier variant to the STOVL design.⁶⁴ And at the conclusion of the NATO summit (Wales, September 2014), the Prime Minister announced a decision to bring both carriers back into operation.⁶⁵

57 [Q56](#)

58 Ministry of Defence, *The Strategic Defence Review*, Cm 3999, July 1998

59 Public Accounts Committee, Fifty-sixth Report of Session 2010–12, *Providing the UK’s Carrier Strike Capability*, November 2011, HC 1427, p 3

60 The NATO definition of STOVL is a “Fixed-wing aircraft capable of clearing a 15 metres (50-foot) obstacle within 450 metres (1500 feet) of commencing take-off run, and capable of landing vertically”, [fas.org](#), p 2-S-7, accessed 9 March 2015

61 HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm 7948, October 2010

62 ‘Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch’ System

63 HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm 7948, October 2010

64 HC Deb, 10 May 2012, [col 141](#) [Commons Chamber] [Statement made by the Rt Hon Philip Hammond former Secretary of State for Defence]

36. These decisions were not inherently irrational. The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) 2013 report said that the MoD had “made a strong case” for its 2010 decision to change the design away from the STOVL variant, because of its limitations, which included a shorter range, a smaller bomb bay payload (making integration of UK weapons more difficult), an extra engine and greater complexity, compared to the carrier variant it was then intending to buy.

37. Rear Admiral Amjad Hussain, Senior Responsible Owner, Director (Precision Attack) and Controller of Navy, Ministry of Defence had also pointed out that the STOVL’s vertical landing on the carrier would require significant power and produce a lot of heat and blast, which would have an impact on deck coatings. In hot climates, the aircraft would need to drop its weapons before landing.⁶⁶ Lord West of Spithead echoed the opinion that the F-35C carrier-variant aircraft, which operated with cat and trap technology, would be a superior option to the STOVL, F-35B variant. He pointed out that the F-35C, which does not have to carry an engine to lift it off the deck, can carry a greater payload and more fuel than STOVL, and additionally has a longer range with the ability to carry more weapons.⁶⁷ According to the Public Accounts Committee, the National Security Council secretariat clearly set out the possible options for amending the carrier programme, and the minutes of NSC meetings record that relevant issues were discussed and the implications of each assessed.⁶⁸

38. The decision to change back to the STOVL variant was taken only when it was realised that converting to the carrier variant of the Joint Strike Fighter would be too expensive. It appeared that 130 compartments of the ship would have needed to be changed.⁶⁹ Sir Peter Luff MP, former Minister for Defence Equipment, Support and Technology, wrote that “the carriers had indeed once been convertible but, it subsequently transpired, only at a significantly earlier stage in their design and construction”.⁷⁰ A change that could have been relatively easy 10 years before would now be complex, induce production delays, and prove incredibly costly.⁷¹

39. Sir Nick Harvey, former Minister of State for the Armed Forces, told us that the cost estimate of the change had grown from half a billion pounds to at least £2 billion and the time delay on the project had extended to about four or five years.⁷² Further, following

65 [NATO Summit 2014: PM end of summit press conference](#), Prime Minister’s Office press conference, 17 September 2014

66 Public Accounts Committee, Fifty-sixth Report of Session 2010–12, [Providing the UK’s Carrier Strike Capability](#), November 2011, HC 1427, Q111

67 [Q199](#)

68 Public Accounts Committee, Fifty-sixth Report of Session 2010–12, [Providing the UK’s Carrier Strike Capability](#), November 2011, HC 1427, Q111, para 4

69 [Q182](#) [Lord West]

70 [DEC0005](#) [Sir Peter Luff MP]

71 National Audit Office, [Carrier Strike: The 2012 reversion decision](#), 9 May 2013

72 [Q250](#)

delays in the US programme, the risk of the UK being the lead nation for the proposed ground breaking electromagnetic catapult technology was considered too high.⁷³

40. The questions raised by this process are: first, if, in 2010, the MoD concluded that the carrier variant was superior, then why was it not procured in the first place? Second, if it was already too late—and too expensive—to re-introduce this variant in 2010, why was the attempt made? (Admiral Sir Jonathon Band, for example has said that “My view is that that was quite a late call in the SDSR process, from all indications”).⁷⁴

Expertise included in deliberations, including the input of relevant knowledge and intelligence

41. Again, there seems to have been an absence of good information in the system. Lord West suggested that there was, from the outset, a fundamental lack of clarity about whether the carriers could be converted and at what cost. Lord West told us that he understood that the design could “easily be converted to cats and traps”,⁷⁵ requiring a change to just three compartments.⁷⁶ Lord West, said that in 1998 he had:

said to the procurement people [...] that the new design for this carrier has to have an ability to be converted to have cats and traps at minimal cost. I was told at that stage, “Yes, we will do that. It’ll only take three compartments.” Jumping to the present time, when the decision was taken by Liam Fox and the team that we would go for the catapult launch version, lo and behold, it was going to take a change to 130 compartments.⁷⁷

Upon discovering that the carriers were to be used with STOVL aircraft, Lord West told us that he “was unable to get it changed”.⁷⁸

Accountability and responsibility, including evidence of an auditable trail for decisions made

42. Whatever the evidence base, however, it was very difficult to know who was actually responsible for making the decision. Lord West said that it was “very difficult” to find out who took particular decisions.⁷⁹ He believed that historically, the First Sea Lord would have been “totally responsible”,⁸⁰ but this was no longer the case. He had been unable to establish who had taken key decisions about the original design of the carriers, for example

73 The UK’s F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter, Standard Note, [SN06278](#), House of Commons Library, February 2015

74 Defence Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2010-12, [The Strategic Defence and Security Review and the National Security Strategy](#), HC 761, para 117

75 [Q192](#)

76 [Q182](#) [Lord West]

77 [Q182](#) [Lord West]

78 [Q182](#)

79 [Q179](#)

80 [Q179](#)

how much they were going to cost and what exactly the design was going to be.⁸¹ One example he noted was that it was not clear who “actually decided what type of equipment would do the automated loading of weapons into the aircraft”.⁸² He said that this key decision had been made within the Procurement Executive and had bypassed the Admiralty Board and the Navy Board, and was not debated within either of those boards.⁸³

43. Lord West said one of the problems involved in procurement programmes was that there were too many people involved, and there was no streamlining of how decisions were made.⁸⁴ He thought that it was much better to have one person responsible, to whom you can say: “This is not going right. You are responsible for it. Your legs are going to be chopped off if you get it wrong”.⁸⁵ He argued that it needed to be obvious from the beginning who was responsible for projects, before costs could get out of hand.⁸⁶

44. As with the 1998 decision, the origins of the 2010 decisions were vague. Sir Nick Harvey told us that everybody in the Ministry of Defence had wanted to make the change, but understood that there was “a lot of risk inherent in changing course this late in the day”.⁸⁷ But that he did not, at the time, consider it his duty to express concerns about Government policy. Rather, he said that the MoD staff were focused on trying to make the ideas of the Government work.⁸⁸

45. Sir Nick Harvey MP also told us that the SDSR 2010, contained a definitive decision within it to amend the carriers’ design to include the cat and trap technology. However, he could not explain how that decision came to be included in the SDSR as the analysis had previously not seemed to be so definitive, and he said that a “thorough job of exploring” the option would have taken “several months”.⁸⁹ He suggested that the decision might have been taken in the “mysterious world on the other side of Whitehall”.⁹⁰ He did not know whether the decision was taken in the NSC, or by the PM, or whether “the spin doctors didn’t think the thing sounded definitive enough and wanted it to be a bit punchier”.⁹¹ In any case, wherever, or however the decision was taken, even a Minister who had been involved in the carrier programme’s development was unable to pinpoint how the decision was made, or who was ultimately responsible for the decision.

46. Sir Nick Harvey MP also noted the problem of institutional memory loss within the MoD, telling us that one of the problems was the “rapid speed at which people move through positions, [...] compared with the rather slow speed at which some of these

81 [Q194](#)

82 [Q197](#)

83 [Q197](#)

84 [Q222](#)

85 [Q228](#)

86 [Q228](#)

87 [Q256](#)

88 [Q257](#)

89 [Q246](#)

90 [Q247](#)

91 [Q247](#)

complex programmes develop”.⁹² This was true at ministerial level as well as for military and civilian officials. This undermined accountability as he said that “those who make some of these decisions, or recommendations, are long gone [...] by the time the consequences manifest themselves”.⁹³

Structure

47. We were told by Lord West that the design of the carriers was considered by a huge number of committees. To achieve a change in direction of policy, the agreement of all these different stakeholders would need to be sought. Lord West told us that “you would have to get the Chief of the Air Staff, the Chief of the Defence Staff and the policy part in the centre—all of them—to agree that the change should happen. I could not achieve that”.⁹⁴

Long-term thinking, including a focus on strategy

48. In 2010, a significant problem appeared to be a lack of long-term foresight in decision-making. Sir Nick Harvey MP explained to us how the decision to change the design of the carriers was rushed through. He told us that after the election in May 2010, the Government intended to complete a Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010.⁹⁵ This left a very short time to put together a defence costings bid, whereas 18 months would have been preferable for completing such a major review. He justified the decision by presenting the decision thus:

Were we going to do the thing as comprehensively and thoroughly as one would like over 18 months but risk being given a cash envelope in the Comprehensive Spending Review? We would then have had to design a defence policy to fit the cash envelope. Or were we going to do the thing on a far more accelerated time scale, accepting that it would be, in a sense, rather a quick and dirty review that would inevitably cut some corners but would equip us with the argument to do battle with the Treasury to try to increase the size of the cash envelope? We chose to do it quickly.⁹⁶

It was noted that “the process was not without its shortcomings”.⁹⁷ Little thorough assessment of the options and risks had been possible in such a squeezed time frame. Sir Peter Luff MP, former Minister for Defence Equipment, Support and Technology, criticised the rushed and inaccurate costing employed by the Ministry of Defence. He told us that:

92 [Q241](#)

93 [Q242](#)

94 [Q190](#)

95 HM Treasury, [Spending Review 2010](#), Cm 7942, October 2010

96 [Q246](#)

97 [Q246](#)

After the conversion decision was taken in the 2010 SDSR, the true extent of the design changes necessary [...] slowly became apparent. So the costs rose well above the estimates provided during the SDSR process and the decision was subsequently correctly reversed. Had we been aware of the scale of the changes and the true cost necessary to revert to the carrier variant of JSF, I am sure we would not have proceeded in the first place.⁹⁸

49. Lord West told us that the MoD was unable to take into account the long-term consequences of its decisions, and complained of “entryism”.⁹⁹ This is where the entry costs of a programme are deliberately lowered, so that a programme is more likely to be given the go-ahead for inclusion in the equipment programme. As the programme progresses, the cost of the project increases dramatically.¹⁰⁰ Lord West told us that in the early stage, the estimated cost of the carriers was £1.8–2 billion.¹⁰¹ Upon review of the carrier designs, Lord West saw that the costs would be likely to be closer to £6.5 billion.¹⁰² The “cost growth” that others observed over time was merely the result of entryism.

Where to go from there

50. The Helmand deployment and the carrier decisions are two clear examples in which poor decision-making in the Ministry of Defence was a risk to people’s lives, and taxpayers’ money. The process seems to have failed at almost every stage of decision-making, from the collection and evaluation of evidence, the definition of the problem, the establishing of objectives, classification and prioritisation, the developing of alternatives, the evaluation of these alternatives against objectives, the reaching of a tentative decision, the evaluation of this tentative decision, and managing its risk. This reflected a structure, which lacked expertise, resisted criticism and challenge, blurred individual accountability, and operated with a bewildering command structure. As a result:

- There was a distinct lack of detailed understanding of the ‘ground situation’—the dangers of Helmand, or in the case of the carriers, the advantages of the ‘carrier variant’ in 1998, and the extreme difficulty and cost of making adaptations to the carriers, when the issue was revisited, twelve years later in 2010.
- Accountability appeared to be considered a vague concept, where no single person took responsibility for leading major decisions.
- There was a distinct lack of strategy formulation and strategy formation by the incumbent Governments.
- In Helmand, senior figures seem to have felt hardly involved in the decision-making—and allowed a dangerous deployment to happen without intervening. In

98 [DEC0005](#) [Sir Peter Luff MP]

99 [Q180](#)

100 [Q180](#)

101 [Q180](#)

102 [Q180](#)

the case of the carriers, it could be argued that in 2010, a long-made decision received too much re-examination, resulting in changes in policy which caused delays and huge costs to the taxpayer.

3 The ultimate goal

Important players following recent reforms

- **Prime Minister:** the head of the UK government and ultimately responsible for the policy and decisions of the Government. The Prime Minister chairs meetings of the National Security Council.
- **Secretary of State for Defence (SofS):** chairs weekly operations-focused meetings, with other Ministers, for briefing on key operational issues by senior staff from the Operations Directorate and the Permanent Joint Headquarters PJHQ.
- **Permanent Under-Secretary (PUS) and Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS):** jointly responsible for defence strategy, and for providing sound and timely advice to Ministers to assist on strategic and operational decision-making.
- **PUS, supported by Director General of Security Policy (DG Sec Pol):** the SofS's principal civilian adviser for operational matters, responsible for ensuring operational decisions are consistent with wider Government policy, compliant with domestic and international law, and appropriately resourced in financial terms.
- **CDS:** as the strategic commander and the Government's principal military adviser, is accountable to the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Defence and to the National Security Council for military success on operations, and also traditionally for the formulation and direction of the strategy that deploys, employs and sustains the armed forces on operations. He chairs the Chiefs of Staff Committee and the Armed Forces Committees and sits by invitation on the National Security Council.
- **Chiefs of Staff:** together with CDS and the Vice-Chief of Defence Staff (VCDS), the four 'Chief Executives' of the army, navy, air force, and joint operations. Formerly, the Service Chiefs contributed substantially to the formulation of military strategy and providing strategic advice; they still advise CDS on military and defence strategy at the Chiefs of Staff Committee and the Armed Forces Committee.
- **The Operations Directorate and the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ):** responsible for providing the formal written advice to the SofS regarding operational matters. Prepared by Current Commitments Teams (CCTs), information is gathered from the MoD Head Office, PJHQ and the Front Line Commands.

The necessary characteristics for decision-making

51. 'Decision-making' is the act of identifying the alternatives available, and choosing between those alternatives based on the values and preferences of the decision-maker.¹⁰³ Decision-making is notoriously prone to psychological bias, and it is, therefore, essential that rigorous structures are put in place to challenge and improve individual decisions. Decision-making in defence has a distinctive need for clarity, because it is entrenched in a three-tier level of decision-making: strategic, operational and tactical, with different tiers of decisions typically made at separate levels of the organisation.

52. Once high-quality, relevant information and evidence has been gathered, effective decision-making in defence is dependent on three further inter-related elements. The first is **who** makes the decision. In the case of defence policy, the leading decision-makers are the Prime Minister, Secretary of State (SofS), Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) and other military and civilian figures (an outline of their decision-making roles is set out in the box

103 Robert Harris, [Introduction to Decision Making, Part 1](#), June 2009, virtualsalt.com, accessed 22 February 2015

above).¹⁰⁴ Individuals have the ability to change the direction of discussion, according to their interests, priorities or force of character. The personal qualifications, experiences and attitudes of the decision-maker (including the needs, preferences and values of that individual) are vital. General Lord Richards of Herstmonceux, former Chief of the Defence Staff, stressed the significance of personalities in decision-making, exclaiming that “personalities really do matter”. He emphasised the importance of “the selection of the right person,” and said that it was vital to ensure that decision-makers possess “the right background and the right temperament”.¹⁰⁵ So too does their education and training, and since tactical competence is different from strategic wisdom, separate education and training is needed for these different types of defence thinking.

53. Second, is the process used to make that decision. A consideration of **process** examines the structure of the organisation in which that decision-maker operates. In the case of defence, this might be through the Defence Board, the National Security Council (NSC),¹⁰⁶ or other committees of the Civil Service. The box below shows the current decision-making structures within the Government and Civil Service that relate to defence.¹⁰⁷ The ‘process’ of decision-making in turn relies on having the right procedures or methodologies for decision-making, the right organisational design, and sufficient high quality and up-to-date information (decision-makers would need to be aware of the costs and benefits of taking a particular decision).

54. The Secretary of State for Defence, Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, insisted that:

Decision-makers need to be well informed. I know where all our units, ships and aircraft are, and I know their state of readiness. I know where we are in budgetary terms, and in terms of the expenditure of each command. We know that and see it on a systematic, monthly basis. If I did not have that, coming from a business background I would certainly feel a bit more unsighted.¹⁰⁸

55. Finally, there is the question of **whether** the option finally chosen was decided through a process of rational, logical consideration of the risks and alternatives available. Were appropriate options identified? Was there a logical, rational deliberation on the options? Were alternatives ranked on the basis of their costs and benefits?

104 [Prime Minister](#), Gov.uk, accessed 02 February 2015; [DEC0007](#) [Ministry of Defence]; and [Q450](#) [Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP]

105 [Q439](#) [Lord Richards]

106 The National Security Council will hereafter be referred to as the ‘NSC’

107 For example, [DEC0007](#) [Ministry of Defence]

108 [Q462](#)

The NSC

- Considers a range of inter-related domestic and international issues relating to UK national security. Formed in May 2010 the NSC has discussed a range of issues including Afghanistan, the Middle East, Russia, North Africa, and Counter-Terrorism.
- Ministers, the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) and intelligence chiefs attend, with meetings chaired by the Prime Minister

Super Chiefs

- An informal meeting, chaired by the CDS, involving the Chiefs of Staff, and representatives of GCHQ the Security Service and the Secret Intelligence Service. Allows a forum to consider the views of the experts before a formal NSC meeting is held. This group can provide a source of longer-term advice on the defence and security contribution to national strategy. It is not known whether this group still meets.

NSC (O)

- Meeting held with officials from relevant Government departments, to prepare briefings to be used, by members of the NSC.

The Defence Board

- The Ministry of Defence's primary decision-making body for non-operational policy matters.
- Chaired by the Secretary of State, it also includes the Minister for the Armed Forces, PUS, CDS, the Vice-Chief of the Defence Staff (VCDS), the Chief of Defence Materiel (CDM), the Director General of Finance (DG Fin) and four positions for non-executive board members.

The Armed Forces Committee

- Allows the Chief of the Defence Staff to gather the views of the Chiefs of Staff in preparing military advice to Ministers and the Defence Board on matters other than operations.

The Chiefs of Staff Committee

- The main forum through which the CDS aims to gather the collective military advice of the Service Chiefs on military strategy and operations.

The Defence Strategy Group (DSG)

- Supports the PUS and the CDS in formulating advice on defence strategy. This is in line with a key recommendation of Lord Levene's 'Defence Reform' report, published in June 2011.

The key expectations: criteria for decision-making

56. Our case-studies in decision-making on UK operations in Helmand Province in 2006, and decisions on the procurement of the aircraft carriers, suggest there were problems in all these areas. In summary, our evidence suggests the following:

1) Expertise included in deliberations, including the input of relevant knowledge and intelligence

57. In both cases there was an absence of detailed, reliable and proven evidence-based advice. Policy analysts did not put together their advice by seeking out and including the

knowledge of experts in the field. Where experts provided advice, this was often ignored, or set aside, without justification.¹⁰⁹

58. In neither case did decision-makers appear to be sufficiently informed, skilled experienced and able to admit where they had gaps in their current knowledge. They were not historically and culturally informed and aware of lessons learnt from previous programmes or campaigns. They appeared to lack the necessary education and experience in strategic thinking. We believe that Ministers should be encouraged and supported to spend much more time in operational theatres, with a broad range of contacts, including local civil society, in order to develop their feeling for ground realities.

2) Accountability and responsibility, including evidence of an auditable trail for decisions made

59. The decision-maker, who was responsible for allowing actions to happen, based on their preferences, was not identifiable. Ministers, who were accountable to Parliament, were not able to justify where they had delegated responsibility. It was difficult to trace where, how and when decisions were made, as well as how they were amended over time. As Major General Elliott has argued:

there should be transparency about who has taken the decision [...]. There has to be public accountability that that decision has been taken. I suggest that much more formal orders should be given and that there should be an auditable trail as to how those things went down.¹¹⁰

3) Structure

60. The structure of decision-making at the Ministry of Defence, did not allow for a clear chain of command, or provide an appropriate route for the flow of information, including between departments. This may be a particular challenge for the MoD as it deals with so much classified information, but is still necessary. As Lieutenant General (retired) Sir Robert Fry, told us, in Afghanistan and Iraq:

there was a military chain of command that went from the Prime Minister to the Chief of the Defence Staff to the Chief of Joint Operations and into the deployed forces in the field. That was entirely clear and it worked well within the military dimension. What I think failed, and failed signally, was the ability to combine that with all the other instruments of national power which should have been part of a co-ordinated strategy.¹¹¹

61. In Afghanistan, the chain of command was further complicated through having a theatre commander in Afghanistan who was generally an American. Lieutenant General

109 For example, [Q29](#) [Brigadier Butler], [Q77](#) [Dr Kim Howells], [Q102](#) [Dr Kim Howells], [Q182](#) [Lord West]

110 [Q284](#)

111 [Q63](#)

(retired) Sir Robert Fry told us that “Therefore, what you had was an American campaign within which you had a British implant. This created all sorts of complications”.¹¹²

4) Ability to challenge

62. The advised information on which decisions are made did not appear to be sufficiently open to debate and challenge from within the Ministry of Defence, involving, where appropriate, other Government departments, and outsiders such as academic commentators. Ministers themselves did not appear able to challenge military advice.

5) Long-term thinking, including a focus on strategy

63. Decision-making did not seem to take into account the long-term needs of the UK. This led to unanticipated costs in the future that would have been unnecessary, had a long-term strategy been identified at the outset.

64. In summary, we did not find in relation to Helmand or the carriers that decisions were made by the right people, within efficient and supportive structures, with rational assessments of the costs and benefits of the available options. The Government has since been relatively frank in conceding that there were serious problems in the decision-making in both cases. The Secretary of State, Rt Hon Michael Fallon, for example, has said that Government was “not being properly recorded or prepared and was all very loose and haphazard”.¹¹³

65. But the Ministry of Defence appears to argue such problems are now in the past, because of two key changes since 2010: the Levene reforms and the introduction of the National Security Council. The Secretary of State, for example, argued, that the introduction of the NSC, had brought “real structure” to decision-making.¹¹⁴ It is to these reforms that we now turn.

112 [Q67](#)

113 [Q521](#)

114 [Q521](#)

4 Efforts to change

Changes to the roles of the Chiefs of Staff and the Chief of the Defence Staff

Levene Reforms

66. The roles of the Chiefs of Staff and the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) have been altered as a result of an inquiry into the Ministry of Defence, led by Lord Levene. This Defence Reform report (2011), subtitled “independent report into the structure and management of the Ministry of Defence”,¹¹⁵ looked, among other things at the MoD’s decision-making capabilities. It criticised:

- the ‘conspiracy of optimism’ between industry, the military, officials and Ministers;
- an institutional focus on short-term affordability at the expense of longer-term planning;
- a lack of clarity over who is responsible and accountable for taking decisions and an emphasis instead on reaching decisions by consensus in committees to achieve coherence across defence, which can let the best be the enemy of the good.

67. The critique of optimism, lack of long-term strategy, and clear accountability, reflects our own conclusions. The central remedy Lord Levene proposed was that the MoD should “provide a simpler framework that [...] makes senior individuals responsible for [decisions], gives them the means and incentives to deliver, and holds them robustly to account”.¹¹⁶ This new framework was defined by two new bodies, the Defence Board and the Defence Strategy Group. In respect of the objective of clarifying and formalising decision-making relationships within the MoD. Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, Secretary of State for Defence told us that:

The primary responsibility inside the Department for decision-making rests with the Defence Board, which I chair monthly. Lord Levene draws attention to the increased influence on the board of the non-executives, the regard in which it is held compared with other Whitehall boards, and the way in which it has been operating. As you are probably aware, alongside the Defence Board we have the Armed Forces Committee and the regular meetings that the Chief of the Defence Staff holds with the service chiefs. In addition, I chair a weekly meeting on operational matters with other Ministers and

¹¹⁵ Lord Levene of Portsoken, [Defence Reform: An independent report into the structure and management of the Ministry of Defence](#), June 2011

¹¹⁶ Lord Levene of Portsoken, [Defence Reform: An independent report into the structure and management of the Ministry of Defence](#), June 2011

representatives of the various departments. As far as the Ministry is concerned, I think decision-making works reasonably well.¹¹⁷

68. To meet the Levene objectives of improving long-term strategic thinking by leaders within the MoD, Jon Thompson, Permanent Under-Secretary, told us that the MoD had created:

the defence strategy group, a strategy function that thought some of those big thoughts. That is currently chaired by the Chief of the Defence Staff and me. It includes [Vice Chief of Defence Staff, Comd JFC, DG Security Policy, DCDS (Military Strategy and Operations), DCDS (Military Capability) and DG Finance as members]¹¹⁸. It meets on a regular basis and thinks about what the state of the world will be in 2050, what will happen as and when the ice caps of the north melt, and what that will do in terms of the security position. It can think longer and it can think bigger thoughts, and that has been a good development.¹¹⁹

Changes to the work of the Chiefs of Staff

69. One of the effects of the Levene Reforms was to diminish further the roles of the heads of the three services (the “Chiefs” including the Chief of the Defence Staff, Chief of the Naval Staff, Chief of the General Staff and the Chief of the Air Staff, Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, and now joined by the Commander of Joint Forces Command). Historically the Chiefs formulated strategy and directed military operations with senior political figures, including the Prime Minister. Over the years, with the establishment of the Ministry of Defence, the rise of the Senior Civil Service, and following major reforms including the Heseltine reforms of 1984, and the Levene reforms of 2011, the roles of the Chiefs of Staff, have been seriously curtailed.

70. Following the Levene reforms in June 2011, the heads of the three services lost their places on the Defence Board but were instead jointly represented by the Chief of the Defence Staff, Lord Richards. Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox MP, then Secretary of State for Defence, was reported as saying that this would end a situation in which the chiefs spent most of their time “trying to influence policy and haggle over funding in London” and, instead, would be “empowered” to determine their own operational priorities once budgets were determined.¹²⁰

71. The Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, Secretary of State for Defence, described the primary role of the Chiefs’ as “to run their services”. The deployment of services falls instead, to the Government through the “principal structures of the Cabinet and NSC”.¹²¹ The Secretary

117 [Q446](#)

118 Ministry of Defence, *How Defence Works*, Version 4.1, September 2014, para 35

119 Oral evidence taken on [7 January 2015](#), HC (2014-15) 896, Q94

120 *“Liam Fox targets waste in ‘radical’ MoD shake-up”*, BBC News UK, 27 June 2011

121 [Q450](#)

of State endorses the idea that the Chiefs primary role lies not in strategic decision-making, but rather in “generating combat power”, which includes responsibilities for “training” and “morale”.¹²² Peter Watkins cited the Levene report as the driver of the change, so that the Chiefs were responsible for running their own services”.¹²³

72. The new structure was intended to allow the Chiefs to concentrate on a Chief Executive role of operations, giving them more control of budgets, and avoiding a situation where they were able to push the particular interests of their own service. Rather the validity of requests could be processed by the CDS or PUS to try to determine an objective balance of ideas for proposal to political leaders for decision. Jon Thompson, the Permanent Under-Secretary told us that:

I do not hear any significant complaints [from the Chiefs]. [...] The new cadre of service Chiefs [...] have taken on the delegated model and the responsibility. If you talk to General Carter, he would describe himself [...] as the chief executive of the Army. That seems to be the kind of approach that we want. He is running an £8 billion organisation with more than 100,000 employees, and I personally fundamentally believe that the right place to take major decisions about the Army is at the Army Board level, with the Defence Board standing back and cohering it. There are different opinions about that model, but so far, I think, over the past four years, it has been very successful.¹²⁴

73. Peter Watkins, the DGSecPol, told us that the Chiefs were not responsible for delivering “strategic advice”, and that “the link between the chiefs as a group and the NSC, through the NSC (Officials), is the Chief of the Defence Staff”.¹²⁵ The ability of the Chiefs to advise and influence upwards is strictly limited to operations.

74. The Chiefs do have the right to put their thoughts directly to the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State. However, when we put this option to former Chief of the Naval Staff, Lord West, he told us that this was very much a last resort. He could have gone formally to the Secretary of State and said:

“This is a really bad decision; I want to go across the road and see the Prime Minister,” which you are entitled to do. You don’t want to use that too often. I used that threat only when it looked as though they might cancel the carrier programme. On a couple of occasions, I made it very clear to the Secretary of State that I would go across the road to see the Prime Minister and make it public if that happened, but I did not have the clout to change it myself.¹²⁶

There is otherwise no formal way for the Chiefs to explain their strategic concerns.

122 [Q291](#) [Major General (retired) Christopher Elliott]

123 [Q542](#)

124 Oral evidence taken on [7 January 2015](#), HC (2014–15) 896, Q89

125 [Q542](#)

126 [Q191](#)

75. Some commentators have criticised the new structure for removing the opportunity for the Chiefs to voice their concerns about strategy and thereby influence national security. These concerns were not lost on former CDS, Lord Richards, who increased weekly meetings with the Chiefs of Staff from one hour to two hours. Lord Richards thought that the Chiefs “absolutely should be part of the strategy”,¹²⁷ and further that military advice should be their “principal and primary role” and not as chief executive of the single services. He claims that he did not accept that the Chiefs should be excluded from strategy.¹²⁸ Lord Richards was concerned, however, that these meetings now happen far more rarely—only once per month.

76. The Chiefs of Staff secretariat has also been described to us as “weak”. Lord Richards told us that:

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.¹²⁹

CDS

77. The 1982 Nott-Lewin reforms, rendered the CDS as the “supreme strategic commander”, which Major General Chris Elliott labelled as a “major change” to decision-making structures.¹³⁰ The CDS is responsible for providing military advice to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.¹³¹ The CDS also “ultimately has responsibility for the implementation of the military strategy”.¹³²

78. Commentators have suggested scope for potential rivalry between the CDS and the Permanent Under-Secretary of State (PUS). The PUS has the:

most unlovely position, because he is wire-brushed by Parliament if things are one penny out, which is an almost impossible target to meet. So he is going around the whole time trying to make sure that value for money is achieved.¹³³

This work brings the PUS into “collision” with the CDS.¹³⁴ Major General Christopher Elliott told us that:

127 [Q437](#)

128 [Q437](#)

129 [Q435](#)

130 [Q283](#)

131 [Q449](#)

132 [Q424](#)

133 [Q291](#) [Major General (retired) Christopher Elliott]

134 [Q291](#) [Major General (retired) Christopher Elliott]

one person is trying to give the services as much as they need and the other person is trying to do the same thing but within the available budget. So they are both coming from the right position, but it puts them into conflict. If you are looking for authority, responsibility and accountability, you cannot split them among other people, which is what is happening at the moment.¹³⁵

Major General Elliott thought that there should be one single person with ultimate responsibility for both budgets and carrying out military strategy.

79. A confusing aspect of the structure within the MoD is that the CDS does not command the Chiefs. Lord Richards, former CDS, noted that even the Prime Minister did not understand that the CDS did not command the Chiefs.¹³⁶ Major General (retired) Christopher Elliott told us that he had spoken with two former CDSs, and he had found that both of them had been unable to affect change because they were not in direct command of the Chiefs of Staff. He said that:

When I spoke to General David Richards, [...] I asked, “Why did you allow these equipment things—the carrier and so on—to go that way? Are you in favour of the carrier?” I won’t tell you what he said! These equipment issues were big issues that were distorting the rest of the programme. He told me, “Well, I don’t have anything to do with the equipment programme.” I asked, “Where are the decisions taken?” He replied, “The decisions are taken by the Minister, talking to the single service Chiefs, who give advice. But they don’t come through me.” When I said to Air Chief Marshal Stirrup, “Why on earth didn’t you bang the heads together, because you had this period of dissension among the Chiefs?” He turned around [...] and said, “Well, I didn’t command them. If I had told them to do it, they could have ignored me.” That is an extraordinary situation to be in.¹³⁷

The CDS does not command the three services, he can only co-ordinate them. There is no chain of command from the CDS down to the Chiefs. The CDS works directly to the Secretary of State and likewise the Chiefs work directly to the Secretary of State. The opinions of the CDS, who is meant to represent a single service voice, will not always tally with the combined views of the Chiefs. Lord Richards described the situation thus:

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

135 [Q291](#) [Major General (retired) Christopher Elliott]

136 [Q441](#)

137 [Q291](#)

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.¹³⁸

80. If the voice of the CDS, on some occasions is not able to express the united opinions of the Chiefs within the MoD, it begs the question of how the CDS might represent the single services at NSC meetings. Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach suggested that the Chiefs were “confident” that the CDS was “offering their view collectively”.¹³⁹

81. Lord Richards, former CDS told us that there was “a lot of inter-service rivalry”.¹⁴⁰ The tension sometimes expresses itself when a competition arises for the allocation of MoD resources. For example Lord West, former First Sea Lord and Chief of the Navy, told us about a disagreement between the air force and navy regarding aircraft for the carriers. He told us that:

the Air Force wanted to have F-35As as their standard attack aircraft, and the F-35Bs were going to be a small adjunct to be put in the carriers and run by the Air Force and the Navy [...] I do not know what my predecessor’s view on this was—with people saying, “Hang on, this is a big mistake.”¹⁴¹

The question then arises, how the CDS might be able to balance the competing interests of the services.¹⁴²

National Security Council

Membership of the National Security Council

Ministerial members of the NSC

- Prime Minister
- Deputy Prime Minister
- Chancellor of the Exchequer
- First Secretary of State/Leader of the House of Commons
- Foreign Secretary
- Home Secretary
- Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change
- Secretary of State for International Development
- Chief Secretary to the Treasury
- Minister for Government Policy, Cabinet Office
- Defence Secretary

Senior officials attending when required

- National Security Adviser (NSA)

138 [Q443](#)

139 [Q549](#)

140 [Q441](#)

141 [Q193](#)

142 [Q204](#)

- Cabinet Secretary
- Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)
- Permanent Under-Secretary, FCO
- Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS)
- Director of Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ)
- Director General of the Security Service (SyS)
- Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC)

Source: Dr Joe Devanney and Josh Harris, *The National Security Council: National Security at the Centre of Government*, page 24, instituteforgovernment.org.uk, accessed 23 March 2015

82. The National Security Council held its first meeting on 12 May 2010. According to the Government, the National Security Council is “the main forum for collective discussion of the government’s objectives for national security and about how best to deliver them in the current financial climate. A key purpose of the Council is to ensure that ministers consider national security in the round and in a strategic way. The Council meets weekly and is chaired by Prime Minister David Cameron”.¹⁴³ The Chief of the Defence Staff and Heads of Intelligence Agencies, “attend when required”.¹⁴⁴ The NSC is formally a sub-committee of the Cabinet. However, questions remain about the exact relationship between this sub-committee and the Cabinet. The question that this raises is whether this structure has replaced “sofa Government” with circumvented Government.¹⁴⁵ We seek clarification on the relationship between the NSC and the Cabinet, and further reassurance on how the Cabinet will be involved in the formulation of national strategy and the next SDSR.

83. We are concerned that under the current arrangements for decision-making, the Prime Minister could hypothetically “short-circuit” the system and impose his own preferences for defence policy. The Prime Minister must be answerable to the House of Commons for all decisions which he wishes to enforce within defence. We recommend that the Government explain to us how the Prime Minister would be held to account, if (s)he chose to short-circuit the system.

84. The concept of the NSC was developed before the current Government took office, and was intended to address a perceived weakness that internal and external security had always been considered separately. Baroness Neville-Jones, a former member of the National Security Council told us that:

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

143 National Security Council, Gov.uk, accessed 20 November 2014

144 National Security Council, Gov.uk, accessed 20 November 2014

145 [Q521](#) [Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, Secretary of State for Defence]

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.¹⁴⁶

To achieve this, it was considered that an interdepartmental approach would be the best way forward.

Assessing the impact of the new structures

85. Would these new structures, created as a result of the Levene Reforms and the introduction of the NSC, prevent a repeat of the decision-making problems, exemplified in Helmand or in the Carrier procurement?

Potential strengths

Structure

86. One of the main benefits of the NSC is that national security is now given priority in a formal setting. Baroness Neville-Jones told us that:

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.¹⁴⁷

87. Observers have noted that one of the core strengths of the NSC is its inter-departmental design.¹⁴⁸ By bringing together decision-makers from across Government, the NSC incorporates a range of considerations into the design of national strategy. Jon Thompson, Permanent Under-Secretary at the MoD, told us that:

A positive advantage of the National Security Council is to integrate the whole of Government when thinking about security and defence issues on a pan-Government basis, although I understand that others may have a different view. My experience of the National Security Council and the underpinning NSC officials, which is the permanent secretary level, has been that it is generally good at joining people together. It is rare to have a defence-only issue because, in general, our approach to solving problems is

¹⁴⁶ [Q353](#)

¹⁴⁷ [Q353](#)

¹⁴⁸ For example [Q448](#) [Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP], [Q361](#), and [Q369](#) [Baroness Neville-Jones]

about governance, security and development. Unless you get those three together, countries such as Afghanistan will not succeed; they could be more stable, but they are not well-run.¹⁴⁹

88. Baroness Neville Jones told us that the inter-departmental element was an important element in designing the NSC. She told us that “unity of government, and the unity of pursuit of policy across the Government, have been greatly aided by the National Security Council”.¹⁵⁰ Although she added, “it is not perfect, and one of the reasons is money”.¹⁵¹

Accountability and responsibility, including evidence of an auditable trail for decisions made

89. The NSC has also addressed the issue of providing an auditable trail for decision-making. The Prime Minister was brought in to chair meetings, so that the programme would have a clear leader, and clear driver. Baroness Neville-Jones told us that:

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.¹⁵²

90. Baroness Neville-Jones told us that “minutes” were produced, and “these decisions are recorded properly, so you would know where the locus of decision-making lay”.¹⁵³

91. The Secretary of State specified how he felt this concept of accountability operated in the Ministry of Defence:

I do not think it is possible for a Secretary of State to be accountable for every single item in the Department. I am accountable for how the Department works—how its processes work, whether they work efficiently and whether they work responsibly. It is a very big organisation, which has gone through some quite extensive change in the last three or four years. One of the ways that I satisfy myself that that change is working reasonably well is through Lord Levene’s annual health check on how the reforms are being implemented.¹⁵⁴

149 Oral evidence taken on [7 January 2015](#), HC (2014–15) 896, Q95

150 [Q353](#)

151 [Q353](#)

152 [Q353](#)

153 [Q398](#)

154 [Q454](#)

Ability to challenge

92. The presence of representatives at the NSC provides an opportunity to challenge military advice, or the general decisions made at the Ministry of Defence. The Secretary of State, Rt Hon Michael Fallon, told us that “there have certainly been many occasions when you query the advice that you are given, ask for more advice, or ask for implications or effects to be considered that are not in the advice. That is part of the normal Whitehall process of constantly testing the advice that is put to you”.¹⁵⁵

Weaknesses

93. The new NSC structure, level of interdepartmental coordination, clear leadership, clearer accountability, clear civilian control, and clear opportunity for challenge, are in our view substantial improvements on the old decision-making systems. But more needs to be done, if the MoD is to address some of the other fundamental problems apparent in the Helmand and Carrier decisions.

Expertise, knowledge and intelligence

94. The first of these is the continuing lack of deep-country or subject expertise, and therefore, the lack of high-quality information or evidence available to the decision-makers. For example, no longer are civil servants required to have ‘domain competence’ in the fields they administer. This has opened up career opportunities to managerial ‘generalists’ who can transfer between Government Departments, at the highest levels, with no previous experience of the subject-areas for which they are taking on responsibility.¹⁵⁶ Thus, a Permanent Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, however intelligent, may have no background whatever in military matters.

95. Inevitably, the senior figures sitting at the NSC cannot themselves be expected to be deep experts in these fields. They are, therefore, very dependent on advice from experts in the rest of the system. We heard evidence that the members of the NSC did not themselves hold the expertise to make key decisions about the configuration of the aircraft carriers. Baroness Neville-Jones told us that “the NSC and the membership that took [the decision] were not tremendously well equipped to take those decisions and did not really understand their full implications”.¹⁵⁷ The lack of expertise of many members of the NSC was noted by witnesses, who saw that the involvement of more expertise and challenge to Government thinking would be beneficial.¹⁵⁸

96. There has not been a fundamental reform yet of the structures of the Foreign Office, the Military, or the Intelligence Agencies, sufficient to provide deep comprehensive on-the-

155 [Q458](#)

156 [Q4](#) [Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles]; Oliver Letwin Speech, instituteforgovernment.org.uk, accessed 23 March 2015; Peter Thomas, *The ideal mandarin: exhuming the dead generalist*, 21 September 2012, instituteforgovernment.org.uk, accessed 23 March 2015

157 [Q381](#)

158 [Q381](#) [Baroness Neville-Jones], [Q354](#) [Baroness Neville-Jones], [Q432](#) [Lord Richards]

ground reporting from conflict theatres for example. Rather the reverse. As our report, ‘Towards the Next Defence and Security Review: Part Two: NATO’, noted, there has been a dramatic decline in understanding of Russia and Crimea.¹⁵⁹ As our report on ‘The Situation in Iraq and Syria and the threat posed by Islamic State in Iraq and The Levant (ISIL)’ noted, there are not sufficient UK assets outside Kurdistan to provide a deep understanding of key players such as the Shia militia or the Sunni tribal groups, and therefore insufficient understanding on which to base an independent strategy, or even challenge in an informed fashion the existing US-Iraqi strategy.¹⁶⁰

97. We heard that the attendees at the NSC were provided with briefing papers, but that these were often disregarded.¹⁶¹ Lord Richards, former CDS and attendee at NSC meetings, compared the atmosphere to an “Oxford union” debate, where discussion points were spontaneous, rather than based on evidence.¹⁶² Lord Richards told us that the NSC (O)¹⁶³ (a meeting of officials) discussed the agenda and briefing papers to be presented at NSC meetings.¹⁶⁴ However he said that he 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.¹⁶⁵

The perceived strength of having the Prime Minister drive the NSC is also one of its key risks, since the inclinations of a single individual would be paramount to the success or failure of the NSC. Baroness Neville-Jones admitted that the Prime Minister, if he wanted to, could “short-circuit” the “whole system”.¹⁶⁶ Traditionally, there was a healthy and creative tension between Government, civil servants and the Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces. Without expert officials and military advisers to speak truth to power and subject politicians’ proposals to the anvil of debate, the resultant ‘strategies’ will inevitably be built on shaky foundations.¹⁶⁷

159 Defence Committee, Third Report of Session 2014–15, [Towards the Next Defence and Security Review: Part Two—NATO](#), HC 358

160 Defence Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2014–15, [The situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham \(DAESH\)](#)

161 [Q422](#) [Lord Richards]

162 [Q422](#)

163 NSC (Officials)

164 [Q422](#) [Lord Richards]

165 [Q422](#)

166 [Q390](#)

167 [Q4](#) [Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles]

Military Expertise

98. One particular, area of expertise, inadequately represented on the NSC, is in military advice. A number of departments are present at the NSC, and some discussions have focused on whether the presence of a single person—the CDS—is enough to express sufficiently the issues considered important by the military. Lord Richards, a former CDS who attended NSC meetings, was adamant that the CDS “alone is sufficient”.¹⁶⁸ He told us that “if I really dug my heels in, very rarely did the committee go against my military advice”.¹⁶⁹ Jon Thompson, PUS, agreed with the supposition that the CDS could sufficiently represent the military, along with the Secretary of State for Defence. He told us that:

I don’t find either the Defence Secretary or the Chief of the Defence Staff to be shrinking wallflowers who cannot express their views in the National Security Council. I am absolutely defending the mechanism—I think it has been successful—and I will continue to do so.¹⁷⁰

However, the removal from the Chiefs of Staff of their traditional role of having an individual and collective responsibility for advising on defence policy as a whole has left a void at the heart of the decision-making machine. Inter-Service rivalries do not disappear simply by excluding the heads of the Armed Forces from the formulation of strategy. There may be a risk that constituting the Chiefs of Staff as a sub-committee of the NSC may reintroduce inter-service rivalry. This could be mitigated by ensuring that civil servants have domain specific expertise. It is important that the Chiefs focus genuinely on strategic discussion in the public interest, rather than the pursuit of single service interests. But disagreements are better thrashed out in an orderly forum than driven underground for arbitrary resolution.

99. A further constraint on the ability of the NSC to consider expertise, is that the issues were considered under tight time constraints. Baroness Neville-Jones told us that Ministers have to have a “very rapid discussion and the documents then have to take shape on the basis of that discussion”.¹⁷¹ The limited amount of time set to consider complex issues of national security plays against the ability of members to consider a detailed exploration of issues and may lead to a superficial style of debate.

100. In the meantime, the system has not become markedly better at substituting for the absence of in-house expertise, by accommodating—in the way the US system for example does—external expertise. Baroness Neville-Jones told us that:

network thinking and some challenge from outside would stimulate the intellectual juices. It is a process of discussion which allows people to identify

168 [Q424](#)

169 [Q424](#)

170 Oral evidence taken on [7 January 2015](#), HC (2014–15) 896, Q99

171 [Q380](#)

what they are doing well, what they are not doing well and what more they ought to be doing.¹⁷²

Specific training and further education for those working in strategy

101. Lord Richards told us that:

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.¹⁷³

This goes to the heart of the problem: the disintegration of a tightly organised strategic planning machine, incorporating the heads of the Armed Forces, coupled with the decline in ‘domain competence’ on the part of civil servants in what should be specialised Departmental roles, provide politicians with too little rigour to focus their attention.

102. It seems that more needs to be done to help the key decision-makers to think more strategically. Baroness Neville-Jones, former member of the National Security Council, thought that strategy was the UK’s “weakest point”.¹⁷⁴ Baroness Neville Jones told us that:

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”.¹⁷⁵

103. Baroness Neville-Jones echoed Lord Richards’ comments that senior political leaders “do not like strategy”.¹⁷⁶ She told us that:

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.¹⁷⁷

104. Lord Richards questioned why the heads of MI6, MI5 and GCHQ were suddenly put into a strategic role on the NSC, having spent their entire careers, being asked to provide intelligence rather than to analyse it. He said that “they need to start being trained to think [strategically] earlier in their careers, however bright they are”.¹⁷⁸ Major General (retired)

172 [Q354](#)

173 [Q445](#)

174 [Q353](#)

175 [Q356](#)

176 [Q445](#)

177 [Q366](#)

178 [Q440](#)

Christopher Elliott, author of ‘High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghan Wars’,¹⁷⁹ made a strong recommendation that “the people who are going to be the strategic commanders have education in strategy”.¹⁸⁰ He believed that the UK was much weaker than the US in ensuring that senior leaders received the appropriate strategic education.¹⁸¹

105. A lack of training may also apply to the CDS, the sole military representative on the NSC. Major General (retired) Elliott told us that previous incumbents of the CDS role “did not, [...] have the education, training or familiarity with strategic thinking”.¹⁸² He called for those who were going to be strategic commanders to be educated in strategy.¹⁸³ He went on to tell us that:

I make the comparison between the lack of tertiary education in the top people, compared with their American opposite numbers. General Martin Dempsey, as a cavalry officer, had a science degree and three masters, one of which was in strategy. I don’t mean to say that that necessarily makes you a better person, but it does get you into a conceptual way of thinking. Nothing like that exists in the present system which is actively used by those who are going to be the Chief of the Defence Staff.¹⁸⁴

106. The NSC itself does not seem to be adequately staffed, or resourced to provide deep expertise or challenge. The secretariat appears to lack the power to commission work.¹⁸⁵ Lord Richards told us that there was a lack of military experience on the NSC secretariat.¹⁸⁶ He was not convinced that the secretariat contained the right mix of skills, saying that:

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.¹⁸⁷

In contrast, in the American system, representatives from the American NSC are out “on the ground and they are articulate”.¹⁸⁸ Baroness Neville-Jones told us 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

179 Christopher L Elliott, *High Command*, (London 2015)

180 [Q319](#)

181 [Q319](#)

182 [Q309](#)

183 [Q319](#)

184 [Q319](#)

185 [Q396](#)

186 [Q406](#)

187 [Q431](#)

188 [Q401](#) [Baroness Neville-Jones]

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.¹⁸⁹

Long-term thinking, including a focus on strategy

107. The NSC could potentially provide an excellent opportunity to discuss strategy, with a variety of expert voices feeding into the conversation. Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, Secretary of State for Defence, thought that the NSC presented an effective forum for discussing strategically important topics. He said that:

I think that it does have a strategic look at some of the big issues that we need to confront, and it certainly did in the run-up to the decision to commit to military action in Iraq...to move from humanitarian and political engagement to military engagement, was a key strategic decision, not least because of the past—because we had already been in Iraq. That was one of the major strategic decisions of this Parliament. I think it was taken in a very systematic and proper way because of the new machinery that was available to us.¹⁹⁰

108. However, Lord Richards intimated that recent campaigns which had been discussed at the NSC, had not benefited from strategic planning. He told us that:

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.¹⁹¹

109. Lord Richards told us that discussion at the NSC tended to centre on tactical, rather than strategic issues:

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

189 [Q353](#)

190 [Q467](#), [Q468](#)

191 [Q424](#)

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.¹⁹²

110. Further criticism centred on the NSC behaving as a reactionary body, reacting to current events, rather than forecasting long-term changes and preparing for those. The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy wrote that “from what we know, it seems to us that [the NSC] is mostly a reactive body, rather than a strategic one, which seems to us to be a lost opportunity”.¹⁹³ Philip Johnston, writing for the Telegraph spelt out the problem with the NSC’s lack of strategic thinking:

Defence matters are rarely discussed in Cabinet any more and are principally the concern of the National Security Council in a break with our age-old constitutional arrangements. The problem with this arrangement is that the NSC seems to be less interested in strategy and has become more “a reactive national incident room” as one military organisation critical of the cuts has called it. Surely with a serious threat re-emerging in Eastern Europe and with the Middle East so unstable, the UK’s security, its national interests and how these are best defended should be at the very heart of this election? Instead, all we are told is that another spending review will be starting shortly, so let’s wait for that. Given the mess the last one caused this is not an edifying prospect.¹⁹⁴

In our report ‘The Strategic Defence and Security Review and the National Security Strategy’, we recommended that “measures be put in place to guard against any blurring” of the responsibilities and roles between the NSC and COBR “in respect of emergencies”.¹⁹⁵ It is for COBR to be the reactionary body and for the NSC to think strategically. This distinction appears to be lost on the Government.

111. At every level of the NSC, long-term, strategic thinking should be evident. Baroness Neville Jones thought that “there should be a greater capacity inside the NSC secretariat to think long-term and to lead long-term thinking”.¹⁹⁶ Since the NSC is the forum where the UK’s strategic national interest was supposed to be discussed, we were left wondering in which Committee (if at all) strategy was actually addressed.

112. It was pointed out to us that there is an informal sub-committee of the NSC “colloquially” called the “Super Chiefs” which attempted to look at “longer term strategy”, as this had tended not to happen in NSC meetings.¹⁹⁷ Lord Richards, former CDS set up the “Super Chiefs” Committee. He told us that

192 [Q423](#)

193 Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, First Report of Session 2014-15, [The next National Security Strategy](#), HC 749, HL Paper 114, para 54

194 [“Why is Cameron not talking about Defence”](#), The Telegraph, 03 March 2015

195 Defence Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2010-12, [The Strategic Defence and Security Review and the National Security Strategy](#), HC 761, para 39

196 [Q400](#)

197 [Q432](#)

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.¹⁹⁸

However, Lord Richards told us that he did not know whether his successor would still be using the Super-Chiefs Committee. To ensure that the Chiefs of Staff would be able to have some input into NSC considerations, Lord Richards told us that

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. [...] 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, [...] because it is where you bring in the other key Departments of State at a level between the two.¹⁹⁹

Lord Richards said that the Super Chiefs did “not have any special secretariat”, but that they used the Chiefs of Staff secretariat.²⁰⁰ He told us that:

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.²⁰¹

Additional weakness of the NSC

113. Our inquiries into decision-making surrounding Helmand Province and the Carriers identified five characteristics for decision-making, where improvement was required. Whilst inquiring into whether the NSC was able to compensate for historic failings in decision-making, a key flaw in the structure of the NSC was identified. We were concerned to hear that implementation of decisions made at the NSC was an area of weakness. Baroness Neville-Jones thought that

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

198 [Q432](#)

199 [Q434](#)

200 [Q436](#)

201 [Q436](#)

the National Security Council. Personally, I would like to see more drive out of the NSC itself.²⁰²

She also told us that

I am not confident about [...] 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.²⁰³

114. To resolve the issue, Baroness Neville-Jones thought that “[the Government] 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”.²⁰⁴

Summary of the impact of the Levene Reforms and the NSC

115. It appeared that the great strength of these new structures is that they resolved previous problems of accountability. They clarified the chain of command, dealt with the perceived problems, particularly in Afghanistan, that military commanders were not under sufficiently close civilian control, tightened ‘job descriptions’ and made it clearer who was responsible for a particular decision, and facilitated coordination between different government departments.

116. This is not an argument therefore for reversing the Levene reforms, or the NSC, but more needs to be done. We are not yet convinced that the necessary improvements have yet been made in expertise and the evaluation of evidence. Nor in the process—as opposed to the structure of decision-making. The tone, and time-limits of the meetings, did not seem to provide the right environment in which to define problems accurately, prioritise objectives, evaluate alternatives, or manage the risk of tentative decisions.

117. The Chiefs of Staff appear to have no formal input into strategy formulation, severely diluting the influence of military expertise at the table. The NSC secretariat is vastly under-resourced. Those involved in long-term planning and strategy formation lack the education and training necessary to help them think in a strategic manner. This in turn limits the ability of ministers and decision-makers to challenge advice confidently and rationally.

202 [Q353](#)

203 [Q400](#)

204 [Q363](#)

5 What more needs to be done?

118. The changes that have been introduced, including the introduction of the National Security Council (NSC) and the Levene reforms, have clarified and improved the structures of decision-making. But they have not yet addressed fundamental problems in the process of decision-making.

119. We are concerned that the Government does not fully recognise the extent of the flaws in past decision-making practice, and therefore needs to make more fundamental changes than have already been effected. We would therefore welcome the Government's views on the analysis in this report, including our assessment of the Helmand and carrier design cases, and our views of more general problems in the past decision-making process.

120. We believe that there is still a crucial lack of authoritative, expert information which can serve as the basis for strong defence decision-making, in particular on the detailed political situation in conflict areas. We do not believe that the existing information-gathering institutions—including within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ministry of Defence and intelligence agencies—are currently capable of providing information of sufficient quality and quantity. We urge the Government to explain how it plans to remedy this situation.

121. We ask the Government to outline how it will equip military and civilian advisers with better education and training in thinking strategically.

122. We believe that Ministers may not have the necessary capacity or personal support to be able to reach a well-informed judgement on the issues they are asked to decide, nor to challenge constructively the official advice they are receiving. We recommend that they should be more often provided with the opportunity to reach their own conclusions, including through visits to conflict regions during which they should have wider and unfiltered access to local opinion. We recommend that the Ministry of Defence investigate how to improve induction training for new Ministers in their portfolios, and examine what additional advice and support they need.

123. We believe that the Levene reforms have been helpful in giving the Chiefs of Staff greater authority for the management of their services, and in reducing the potential for Single Service institutional rivalries to distort spending plans and operational policy. But these benefits have also come at the expense of severely limiting the ability of the Chiefs to provide expert strategical advice. We feel that the post-Levene Chiefs of Staff Committee is too detached from the central policy-making process in the MoD and also, crucially, from the NSC. We recommend that the roles of the Chief of Staff should be redefined to give greater weight to their function as strategy advisors. We recommend that the Chiefs of Staff Committee should become the official military sub-committee of the NSC, in order to tender to it joint military advice on strategy. We

believe that such a sub-committee will be effective only if its military members do not use its deliberations to pursue Single Service institutional agendas.

124. We note the drastic reduction in recent years of domain competence in the Civil Service, reflected in the civilian representatives on the Defence Board and on other high level decision-making bodies. We also note the deplorable loss of defence scientific expertise from the Defence Board. We recommend that the Civil Service should once again be required to possess specialist defence and technical expertise to improve the quality of decision-making. This will also have the benefit of balancing military input with expert civilian input and of reducing the temptation to pursue Single Service agendas.

125. Furthermore we consider that there are major weaknesses in how the NSC operates. This is particularly important given its dominant role in decision-making.

126. We are concerned that discussion in NSC meetings is too tactical and discursive, and does not sufficiently draw on authoritative expert opinion.

127. We believe that the creation of the NSC has failed to eliminate the risk of a personal, private and reactive style of decision-making involving only the Prime Minister and his closest advisers.

128. We are concerned that the increased use of the NSC could have the effect of undercutting the principle of Cabinet government. We seek clarification from the Government on the relationship between the NSC and the Cabinet, and further reassurance on how the Cabinet will be involved with national strategy and the formulation of the next SDSR.

129. We therefore conclude that unless the Government makes better use of its decision-making institutions, and draws on higher quality information and advice, there is a significant risk that future decisions on defence and security issues will be as poor as in the past, with consequences which are just as damaging.

130. We urge the Government to take urgent steps to remedy these weaknesses, and to put in place a genuinely strategic, well-informed and properly balanced decision-making machine.

Formal Minutes

Wednesday 18 March 2015

Members present:

Rory Stewart, in the Chair

Richard Benyon

Mr Dai Havard

Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis

Mrs Madeleine Moon

Sir Bob Russell

Bob Stewart

Ms Gisela Stuart

Derek Twigg

Draft Report (*Decision-making in Defence Policy*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 130 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Eleventh Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[The Committee adjourned

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry page at www.parliament.uk/defcom.

Tuesday 16 December 2014

Question number

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles KCMG LVO, former HM Ambassador to Kabul, and former Special Representative to the Foreign Secretary for Afghanistan and Pakistan

[Q1–25](#)

Brigadier (Retd) Ed Butler

[Q26–49](#)

Lieutenant General (retired) Sir Robert Fry KCB CBE and Mr Desmond Bowen, former Director General of Policy, Ministry of Defence

[Q50–75](#)

Tuesday 6 January 2015

Dr Kim Howells, former Foreign Office Minister

[Q76–117](#)

Pauline Hayes, former Head of Office in Afghanistan 2010–12, Department for International Development

[Q118–177](#)

Wednesday 14 January 2015

Rt Hon Lord West of Spithead, former First Sea Lord

[Q178–236](#)

Sir Nick Harvey, former Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Ministry of Defence

[Q237–279](#)

Wednesday 21 January 2015

Major General (retired) Christopher Elliott, author of "High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghan Wars"

[Q280–351](#)

Tuesday 3 February 2015

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

[Q352–405](#)

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux, former Chief of the Defence Staff

[Q406–445](#)

Wednesday 4 February 2015

Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, Secretary of State for Defence, **Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach**, Vice Chief of Defence Staff, and **Peter Watkins**, Director General Security Policy

[Q446–556](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry web page at www.parliament.uk/defcom. DEC numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Anonymous ([DEC0002](#))
- 2 Defencesynergia ([DEC0003](#))
- 3 Dr Tony Head ([DEC0006](#))
- 4 Mr James Gray MP ([DEC0001](#))
- 5 Ministry Of Defence ([DEC0007](#))
- 6 Sir Peter Luff MP ([DEC0005](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Session

All publications from the Committee are available on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/defcom.

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2014–15

First Report	The Ministry of Defence Main Estimates 2014–15	HC 469 (HC 681)
Second Report and First Joint Report	Scrutiny of Arms Export and Arms Controls (2014) First Joint Report of the Business, Innovation and Skills, Defence, Foreign Affairs and International Development Committees of Session 2014–15	HC 186 (Cm 8935)
Third Report	Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part Two: NATO	HC 358 (HC 755)
Fourth Report	The Armed Forces Covenant in Action Part 5: Military Casualties, a review of progress	HC 527 (HC 953)
Fifth Report	Armed Forces (Service Complaints and Financial Assistance) Bill	HC 508 (HC 900)
Sixth Report	Pre-appointment hearing for the Service Complaints Commissioner	HC 832
Seventh Report	The situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham (DAESH)	HC 690 (HC 1126)
Eighth Report	Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2013–14	HC 896
Ninth Report and First Joint Report	Scrutiny of Arms Export and Arms Controls (2015) First Joint Report of the Business, Innovation and Skills, Defence, Foreign Affairs and International Development Committees of Session 2014–15	HC 608
Tenth Report	Re-thinking Defence to meet new threats	HC 512
Eleventh Report	Decision-making in Defence Policy	HC 682
Twelfth Report	Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part Three	HC 1127