



House of Commons
Public Administration Select
Committee

**The Iraq Inquiry:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Ninth Report of
Session 2008–09**

**Fifth Special Report of Session 2008–
09**

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The Public Administration Select Committee

The Public Administration Select Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith, and to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service.

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The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/pasc>

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Steven Mark (Clerk), David Slater (Second Clerk), Pauline Ngan (Committee Specialist), Louise Glen (Senior Committee Assistant), Lori Verwaerde (Committee Assistant) and John Kittle (Committee Support Assistant)

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Fifth Special Report

The Public Administration Select Committee reported to the House on *The Iraq Inquiry* in its Ninth Report of Session 2008-09, published 18 June 2009 as HC 721. The Government Response was received on 21 July 2009 and is published below as an appendix to this Report.

Government response

Government Response to the Public Administration Select Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2008-09, *The Iraq Inquiry* (HC 721)

1. While we welcome the Government's announcement that an inquiry into Iraq will be held, that it will have a broad scope, and that it will aim to learn lessons from the decision to go to war, the conflict and its aftermath, there is a strong risk that the inquiry as currently constituted will not be able to pursue what should be its fundamental purpose: to identify the truth and ensure that the executive can be held properly accountable for its decisions and conduct in relation to Iraq. This fundamental purpose should be encapsulated within the inquiry's formal terms of reference. (Paragraph 6)

The Government notes that the Committee welcomed the Statement made by the Prime Minister to the House of Commons on 15 June 2009 announcing the Iraq Inquiry.

The Government's view is that the key objective of the Inquiry is to identify lessons learned which the Government can apply to other conflict and post-conflict situations. The Inquiry's formal terms of reference, announced by the Prime Minister in his statement of 15 June 2009, are to conduct an independent inquiry into the period from summer 2001, before military operations began in March 2003, and subsequent UK involvement in Iraq through to 31 July 2009. It is for the Rt. hon. Sir John Chilcot GCB, as Chair of the Inquiry Committee, in consultation with the other Inquiry Committee members, to take decisions on which areas the Inquiry will focus on within its overall scope.

2. We recommend that consideration be given to splitting the inquiry into two stages: the first stage to concentrate on the British decision to go to war; and the second stage to consider the broader lessons from the conflict and its aftermath.

The Government's view is that it is for Sir John Chilcot, in consultation with the other Inquiry Committee members, to take decisions on how the Inquiry conducts its work. The Government welcomes the fact that Sir John will make his intentions public in due course.

3. The need for effective accountability and public confidence demands that the inquiry be conducted as openly and publicly as possible. We recommend that the Government reconsiders its decision to conduct the Iraq inquiry in private. There needs instead to be a presumption in favour of the inquiry proceeding in an open and public manner. There should be only very limited exceptions to this general rule, which would be best decided by the members of the inquiry itself, not by the Government.

The Government's view is that the key objective of the Inquiry is to identify lessons learned. This requires access to a wide range of highly sensitive information and witnesses who can speak frankly. By its very nature, the Inquiry will also raise issues relating to the UK's national security. For these reasons it is essential for the Inquiry to be able to operate in private where necessary. The Government's view is that it is for Sir John Chilcot, in consultation with the other Inquiry Committee members, to decide which areas of the Inquiry's work will be made public. The Prime Minister has asked the members of the Inquiry to publish their final report in as much detail as possible.

4. In setting up the Iraq inquiry, the Government has—in our view wrongly—adopted the top-down process that we warned against. One way of putting this right, at least in part, would be to give Parliament a formal role in establishing the inquiry.

5. It is not too late now for the Government to allow, at minimum, a debate and free vote in the House of Commons on its proposal for an inquiry. It is wrong in principle that the executive alone should determine the terms of this inquiry, when the conduct of the executive is a central part of what the inquiry will have to consider.

6. Given the nature of the inquiry and the scope of the issues it is considering, we believe that the Iraq inquiry would benefit from the inclusion of members with political experience as a minority of its membership.

The Government welcomes the fact that the House debated the Inquiry fully on 24 June 2009 and that it endorsed the Government's motion.

The members of the Inquiry Committee are highly respected, entirely independent and non-partisan experts. The Inquiry Committee is open to seek views from individuals with a political background. The Government notes that Sir John Chilcot has met the Chair of the Committee to discuss the work of the Inquiry. The Committee will also be aware that Sir John has met the leaders of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Opposition and is meeting the chairs of other relevant select committees and the Intelligence and Security Committee to elicit their views. The Government welcomes that engagement.

7. The Iraq inquiry is a unique opportunity to explore issues about which there has been significant public disquiet for some time. Only if the inquiry is conducted in a manner which is legitimate and credible—and is seen to be so—will the public be assured that it is not a whitewash. We welcome the fact that there is to be an inquiry. But it is the wrong kind of inquiry, decided and announced in the wrong kind of way. We urge the Government to reconsider the way in which the Iraq inquiry will be conducted, so that this key opportunity to restore public confidence is not missed.

The Prime Minister's statement of 15 June 2009 made clear that the Inquiry is fully independent of Government and non-partisan. The Inquiry's scope is unprecedented. The Inquiry will receive the Government's full cooperation and have access to the fullest range of information, including secret information. The Prime Minister has asked the Inquiry members to ensure that the final report will be able to disclose all but the most sensitive information. The Government hopes that the Inquiry's findings will provide lessons

learned which can help strengthen the health of our democracy, our diplomacy and our military. The Inquiry's findings will be debated in the House of Commons and the House of Lords.