



In Focus

Iraq Inquiry (Chilcot): Timeline of Principal Developments

June 2009: Inquiry Announced

On 15 June 2009, the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, announced the establishment of an independent privy counsellor committee of inquiry to consider the UK's military involvement in Iraq.¹ It would cover the period from summer 2001, before military operations began in Iraq in March 2003, and the UK's subsequent involvement, to the end of July 2009, when the last troops returned home. The then Government had previously resisted calls for an official, broad ranging inquiry to investigate the lead up to the Iraq war.² In June 2009, Gordon Brown explained that, with the final British combat troops about to return from Iraq, it was "the right time" to ensure a "proper process" was in place to learn the lessons of the "complex and often controversial events of the last six years".³ The committee of the inquiry would be chaired by Sir John Chilcot, and include Baroness Prashar (Crossbench), Sir Roderick Lyne, Sir Lawrence Freedman and Sir Martin Gilbert. Given the complexity of the issues that the inquiry would address, Gordon Brown added that he had been advised "it will take a year".

July 2009: Inquiry Launched

The Iraq Inquiry (known as the "Chilcot Inquiry") was officially launched on 30 July 2009. A statement made by Sir John Chilcot set out the Inquiry's terms of reference.⁴ He confirmed the Inquiry would cover the run-up to the conflict in Iraq, military action and its aftermath, from summer of 2001 to the end of July 2009. Sir John explained it would "be considering the UK's involvement in Iraq, including the way decisions were made and actions taken, to establish, as accurately as possible, what happened and to identify the lessons that can be learned" and that those lessons "will help ensure that, if we face similar situations in future, the government of the day is best equipped to respond to those situations in the most effective manner in the best interests of the country". The Inquiry intended to complete its task "as quickly as possible" but was "determined to be thorough"; it could not know how long the Inquiry would take "until it had read the background material and heard the evidence". The Committee was not expected to start work until after the end of July, but Sir John stated that the Inquiry had already made requests for Government documents.

November 2009–February 2011: Hearings

Gordon Brown had stated that evidence would be heard in private.⁵ This received criticism, including from the House of Commons Public Administration Committee in its report published on 18 June 2009 which noted that the need for "effective accountability and public confidence demands that the Inquiry be conducted as openly and publicly as possible".⁶ The Inquiry stressed its commitment to openness and took evidence over a number of months, with hearings held in public "wherever possible".⁷ The first round of public hearings began on 24 November 2009 until early February 2010. The second round ran from 29 June to 30 July 2010, following a break for the general election.⁸ The final round ran from 18 January to 2 February 2011.

May 2011

On 12 May 2011, the Inquiry stated that it had hoped to present its report to the Prime Minister later in 2011, but that it would not be able to do so before Parliament's summer recess.⁹ Sir John explained the Inquiry was continuing to draw together and analyse the evidence presented "in tens of thousands of documents and many hundreds of hours of witness testimony". He said that a report covering so wide and complex a time period "necessarily takes time" to write and requested that all further submissions were received by the end of June 2011. Should the inquiry decide to make criticisms in its report, Sir John explained it would involve further processes ("Maxwellisation") to give those individuals criticised the opportunity to respond—as is the case with all public inquiries. He added that the Inquiry "cannot predict now how long that would take".

While writing the report, the Inquiry simultaneously sought the "declassification"—the process of gaining agreement from the Government to publish sensitive or previously classified material—of what it described as "much relevant material".¹⁰ The precise obligations on both sides, to ensure that the Government provided the Inquiry with the information it needed to fulfil its remit and that the Inquiry manages sensitive or classified information securely and appropriately, is set out in a Protocol (a standard agreement between inquiries and government).¹¹ Where the Government agreed declassification, the Inquiry intended to publish the evidence either in, or alongside, its final report.¹² Some declassified documents had already been published on the Inquiry website.

July 2012

Sir John reported that the Inquiry would be in a position to begin the Maxwellisation process by the middle of 2013.¹³ In an earlier letter to the then Cabinet Secretary, Sir Gus O'Donnell, (now Lord O'Donnell), in October 2011, the Inquiry noted it would take at least until summer 2012 to write a draft report and that, should Maxwellisation be required, it would only be possible to start the process when all relevant sections of the draft report had been prepared.

July 2013

On 15 July 2013, Sir John noted in a letter to the Prime Minister, David Cameron, that the Inquiry had "begun a dialogue" with the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood, about material that the Inquiry wished to include in its report.¹⁴ This covered discussions in cabinet and cabinet committees and records of discussions between former prime ministers Mr Blair and Mr Brown and former presidents Bush and Obama. It also covered notes from Mr Blair to former President Bush. The Inquiry's intention was to begin the confidential process of writing to individuals that may be criticised in the report. It expected that letters with the provisional criticisms would follow at the end of October 2013, but that would depend on the satisfactory completion of discussions between the Inquiry and the Government on disclosure of material it wished to publish.

November 2013

In an update on 4 November 2013, the Inquiry reiterated that its ability to start the Maxwellisation process was "dependent on the satisfactory completion of discussions between the Inquiry and the Government on disclosure of material that the Inquiry wishes to include in its report or publish alongside it".¹⁵ The Inquiry reported that since the beginning of June 2013, it had submitted ten requests covering more than 200 cabinet-level discussions, 25 notes from Mr Blair to former President Bush and more than 130 records of conversations between either Mr Blair or Mr Brown and former President Bush. However, the Government and the Inquiry had not reached a final position on the disclosure of these more difficult categories of document.

May 2014

On 28 May 2014, Sir John wrote to Sir Jeremy Heywood highlighting that an agreement had been reached on the principles that would underpin the disclosure of material from cabinet-level discussions and communications between Mr Blair and former President Bush. Sir John stated that these documents had “raised difficult issues of long-standing principle”.¹⁶ He said that agreement had already been reached on the details of what the Inquiry would publish in relation to more than 200 cabinet and cabinet committee meetings, and that detailed consideration of “gists and quotes”, requested by the Inquiry from communications between the former UK prime ministers and former presidents of the United States, was underway. The Inquiry wrote that it was “not yet clear how long that will take but the Inquiry and the Government should work to complete the task as soon as possible”. It reiterated that only once agreement had been reached, could the next phase of the Maxwellisation process begin.

January 2015–February 2015

A letter from Sir John Chilcot to David Cameron on 20 January 2015 recorded “very substantial progress”.¹⁷ He stated that agreement had been reached with Sir Jeremy Heywood on the publication of 29 notes from Mr Blair to former President Bush, subject to “a very small number of essential redactions” alongside the Inquiry’s final report. Detail of what material would be published relating to conversations between them had also been agreed, consistent with the principles established in May 2014. Sir John confirmed that individuals subject to criticism in the Inquiry’s draft report were being given the opportunity to respond. He stated it was “not possible to estimate the completion date of the report” until the Inquiry had received and evaluated all responses, however, Sir John saw “no realistic prospect of delivering the report before the May 2015 general election”. Ministers had previously explained that if publication were to be before the May general election, it would have to be published by the end of February in order for there to be time allowed for substantial consultation and debate.¹⁸ David Cameron replied on 20 January 2015 stating that he would have liked to have seen the report published already and “certainly well before the forthcoming election”.¹⁹ He hoped the Inquiry would be able to publish shortly thereafter.

On 21 January 2015, Sir Richard Ottoway, the then chair of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC), wrote to Sir John expressing concerns that the FAC shared about the delays in the Inquiry.²⁰ He proposed that Sir John attend the Committee to give oral evidence, which Sir John did on 4 February 2015.²¹

June 2015–August 2015

By 15 June 2015 a large proportion of responses expected as part of the Maxwellisation process had been received by the Inquiry and were described as “constructive”.²² However, a number of responses had “opened up new issues” or “referred to material that was not part of the evidence submitted to the Inquiry”. Sir John explained in a letter to David Cameron that it was now essential to receive the remainder of responses to allow the process to be completed, reiterating that “[o]nly when all responses are in our possession and have been evaluated will I be able to write to you with a realistic timetable for completion”. Following rising speculation about the delays of the Inquiry, on 26 August 2015 Sir John made a statement acknowledging that some questioned why the Maxwellisation process was happening at all.²³ The statement explained that the process was “essential” to the fairness, accuracy and completion of the report, that individuals had not been given an open ended timescale, and that it was not a process of negotiation.

September 2015–October 2015

In September 2015, the Inquiry confirmed that it had received the last Maxwell responses.²⁴ It stated that once it had evaluated the responses—described by Sir John as “detailed and substantial”—it would be

able to establish with confidence the time needed to complete the Inquiry's work. In a letter to David Cameron on 28 October 2015, Sir John noted that the Inquiry anticipated completing the text of the report in the week of 18 April 2016 and expected to be in a position to agree a publication date for June or July 2016.²⁵ In a letter to Sir John, in reply, David Cameron expressed his disappointment that it would not be possible to publish the report until early summer.²⁶

May 2016

Following completion of the report, national security checks of its contents and the Government's obligations under Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights were completed within two weeks, in April 2016.²⁷ On 6 May 2016, Sir John notified David Cameron that he proposed to publish the report on 6 July 2016.²⁸ This would "allow suitable time for the Inquiry to prepare the 2.6 million word report for publication, including final proofreading, formatting, printing and the steps required for electronic publication". Mr Cameron replied, noting that his officials stood ready to assist on the arrangements for the publication.²⁹

¹ [HC Hansard, 15 June 2009, cols 21–38.](#)

² For further information, see House of Commons Library, [Iraq: Calls for an Inquiry and Historical Precedents](#), 4 June 2015.

³ [HC Hansard, 15 June 2009, col 23–4.](#)

⁴ Iraq Inquiry, [‘Statement by Sir John Chilcot, Chairman of the Iraq Inquiry, at a News Conference on Thursday, 30 July 2009’](#), 30 July 2009.

⁵ [HC Hansard, 15 June 2009, col 23.](#)

⁶ House of Commons Public Administration Committee, [The Iraq Inquiry](#), 18 June 2009, HC 721 of session 2008–09, p 3.

⁷ Iraq Inquiry, [‘Hearings’](#), accessed 15 June 2016. For further information, see [Sir John Chilcot's Opening Statement](#), 24 November 2009.

⁸ Iraq Inquiry, [About the Inquiry](#), accessed 15 June 2016.

⁹ Iraq Inquiry, [‘Iraq Inquiry Publishes Further Documents, Transcripts and Witness Statements’](#), 12 May 2011.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Cabinet Office, [‘Protocol Between the Iraq Inquiry and Her Majesty's Government Regarding Documents and Other Written and Electronic Information’](#), 15 June 2009.

¹² Iraq Inquiry, [‘About the Iraq Inquiry: Questions and Answers’](#), accessed 14 June 2016.

¹³ Iraq Inquiry, [Letter from Sir John Chilcot to the Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron: Iraq Inquiry](#), 13 July 2012.

¹⁴ Iraq Inquiry, [Letter from Sir John Chilcot to the Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron: Iraq Inquiry—Update on Progress](#), 15 July 2013.

¹⁵ Iraq Inquiry, [Letter from Sir John Chilcot to the Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron: Iraq Enquiry—Maxwellisation](#), 4 November 2013.

¹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, [Letter from Sir John Chilcot to Sir Jeremy Heywood](#), 28 May 2014.

¹⁷ Iraq Inquiry, [Letter from Sir John Chilcot to the Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron: Iraq Inquiry—Progress](#), 20 January 2015.

¹⁸ [HL Hansard, 6 January 2015, cols 249.](#)

¹⁹ Prime Minister's Office, [Letter from the Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron, to Sir John Chilcot](#), 20 January 2015.

²⁰ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, [Letter from Sir Richard Ottaway, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee to Sir John Chilcot—Iraq Inquiry Progress](#), 20 January 2015.

²¹ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, [Oral Evidence: Progress of the Iraq Inquiry](#), HC Paper 1027, 4 February 2015.

²² Iraq Inquiry, [Letter from Sir John Chilcot to the Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron: Iraq Inquiry—Progress](#), 15 June 2015.

²³ Iraq Inquiry, [Statement by the Chair of the Iraq Inquiry](#), 26 August 2015.

²⁴ Iraq Inquiry, [Letter from Sir John Chilcot to Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr Crispin Blunt](#), 28 October 2015.

²⁵ Iraq Inquiry, [Letter from Sir John Chilcot to the Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron](#), 28 October 2015.

²⁶ Prime Minister's Office, [Letter from the Prime Minister, David Cameron, to Sir John Chilcot](#), 29 October 2015.

²⁷ Prime Minister's Office, [Letter from the Prime Minister, David Cameron, to Sir John Chilcot](#), May 2016.

²⁸ Iraq Inquiry, [Letter from Sir John Chilcot to the Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron](#), 6 May 2016.

²⁹ Prime Minister's Office, [Letter from the Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron, to Sir John Chilcot](#), May 2016.