

## HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

With more than half a year now passed since the Chilcot report was released this seemed to be a good moment to reflect upon my experience as a historian involved in a public inquiry. Because this provides an interesting contrast with work of an Inquiry, I will draw upon my role as Official Historian of the Falklands Campaign. Trident comes in because much earlier in my career I tried to work out how to research British nuclear policy at a time when as much effort was put into deterring outside scrutiny as there was into deterring the Russians.

Accepting roles as an official historian and as a member of an official Inquiry introduces two forms of accountability. On the one hand there is the challenge of holding ministers, officials and officers directly to account, but on the other of respecting the degree of personal accountability that this position entails.

Let me first make it clear that I am talking for myself and not on behalf of the other members of the Chilcot Inquiry. While I am going to talk about what the experience meant for me as a historian my contribution was only part of the larger effort, led by John Chilcot. We were very much a team, supported by an excellent secretariat as well as first-rate legal and military advisers. And to get the disappointment over quickly I am not going to be offering startling revelations about the workings of the Inquiry. This is largely because its work – and workings – were relatively straightforward. Despite the pre-publication comments about the length of the report and the time it had taken the reasons for this were apparent on publication. At times the media speculation was intrusive and irritating, especially the repetitive joke about whether Godot would arrive before the report, each

time offered as if this was a unique moment of humour. Still what was remarkable – and for this I give credit to John’s leadership - was that as a group we stuck together, our findings did not leak in advance, our disagreements rarely touched on the broad thrust of the report and were always settled without fuss, and compared with other inquiries we were not at all expensive. Academics and former mandarins come at a discount to lawyers.

What role can an historian play in an inquiry? As academics they can challenge popular misconceptions and encourage reappraisals of characters we thought we knew well. In doing this they are rarely shy about passing opinions on the great figures or great events of the past – they take views on the diplomacy of Disraeli, generalship of Haig or Montgomery, the management of the Irish issue in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century or even whether we might have held on to America in 1776. But as we do so we are accountable largely to our peers and our publishers. We are fortunate to live in a country which allows for the possibility that we may have misunderstood our own past and in which it is possible to challenge cherished national myths. Other than those flurries of excitement when a minister appears to suggest that there are not enough monarchs or battles in the school curriculum the state stays out of the practice of history. That is why the very notion of an “official historian” invites a degree of suspicion as it suggests that this essential independence has been compromised for the sake of privileged access to archives. But it says a lot for the British tradition of academic freedom that, even when the state is sponsor, none of the official historians I have ever spoken to felt politically pressured or compromised in any way. I certainly did not.

Yet despite this tradition, nurtured in the Official Histories programme, which I hope can be kept going, historians have not played a formal role in

public inquiries. The possibility was certainly discussed when the Franks Committee was being put together but in the end the government opted for a mixture of politicians and public servants. Otherwise the tendency has been to rely on the judiciary for the skills necessary to address questions of wrong-doing and administrative failings. There is an understandable view that lawyers not only know how to get at the facts but also the proper care that needs to be taken when forming judgements that may affect reputations and even lead to criminal proceedings. Historians have a distinctive approach to evidence – they are less inclined to follow rules about what is admissible, more inclined to pay attention to hearsay and even gossip, more interested in the assumptions of the time and the overall context in which events are taking place. They are often less concerned about individual responsibility than what an event may reveal about larger forces at work in the social, economic and political spheres. A lawyer knows to answer the question that has been asked; the historian is always looking for more interesting questions. These tendencies may make historians uncomfortable contributors to the formalities and disciplines of an official inquiry.

In the past historians might also have felt that the events under consideration were too fresh for any serious historical inquiry, that really decades should pass before they weighed in. Only with the passage of time could a proper perspective be reached and would the necessary archives become available.

The first of these objections to contemporary history still has some force. It becomes easier to make sense of events the more we know about what followed. For example the decision not to go after Saddam Hussein in 1991 at the end of Desert Storm looked to be unwise in the subsequent decade as he continued to defy the international community but not so stupid after

2003 when the problems of occupying Iraq became apparent. What this tells us is that we interpret events in terms of the preoccupations of our time. But that is also the case even if one is looking at the crusades or the English Civil War. The passage of time rarely settles such debates – as we can see with the continuing arguments about the origins of the First World War. At any rate there is still something about the historical method in terms of evaluating evidence and placing it in context that makes it of value even when trying to understand the present.

The second objection – that it is necessary to wait until all the evidence is available – no longer has such force. It used to be a long wait before the archives were opened. Until the Public Records Act of 1967 it was 50 years. The wait then went down to 30 and is moving to 20, so it is now not so long. Of course the process of record keeping has changed – not really for the better – with the amount of government business that is left unrecorded growing with the use of phones and emails. One reason for this, and also some mitigation, is the tendency for so much to be leaked almost immediately or to be soon disclosed. This is thanks to the Freedom of Information Act and the speed with which former ministers, officials and officers rush to print with their memoirs and diaries. For all these reasons contemporary history is now much more respectable and rewarding.

## II

To illustrate this change let me start with my experience as graduate researcher in the early 1970s. The limits of official secrecy were very real, especially if you wished to work on nuclear matters. For my PhD I focused on how intelligence assessments influenced US nuclear policy. There was no way I could have done comparable research on UK policy. There had been the remarkably revealing official histories conducted by Margaret

Gowing on the early years of the British nuclear programme, which incidentally set valuable precedents for later histories in exploring policy failures and ineptitude, as well as acknowledging real achievements. The question of whether Britain was capable of remaining a nuclear power, which was only settled by the American offer of the Polaris submarine-launched missiles at the December 1962 Nassau summit, was also well covered at the time and subsequently. But only the briefest details were available about subsequent policy choices. From 1965 to 1980 there were no parliamentary debates and official statements were confined to promises not to move to a new generation of nuclear missiles while maintaining the effectiveness of the deterrent. In the late 1970s it was perfectly clear that the issue of Polaris replacement could not be delayed much longer. Now at Chatham House, I supported Ian Smart's study of this issue. As was normal practice a study group was set up to advise Ian. All government officials were told to stay away.

This experience led me to decide to write a book on *Britain and Nuclear Weapons* pulling together whatever I could actually find out about UK nuclear policy. The answer was not a lot until the government changed in May 1979. Soon there was more openness on policy. I was now able to get some proper background material on recent decision-making – helped I should say by some great investigative work published in *the Times* by Peter Hennessy. It turned out that far more preparatory analysis of the options had been going on under the 1974-9 Labour government than they had let on, and also that they had presided over a new warhead programme- *Chevaline* – that had suffered cost delays and overruns. The secrecy was more about not causing trouble for the Labour Party than protecting national security. The result, especially in the case of *Chevaline*, was that an expensive programme was not subject to proper scrutiny.

Because of this work I was invited to join the new Select Committee on Defence as an advisor. Its first inquiry was to be an investigation into the Polaris replacement decision. The politics of the situation were too delicate to permit an agreed report but the Inquiry did get on record much more material about nuclear programmes and policy. The Committee also followed this up with annual reports on Trident from which it was possible to monitor progress and which led I think to a more relaxed attitude towards secrecy. There was also the famous MoD Open Government Document on the nuclear programme – drafted by Michael Quinlan, a man who was committed to keeping people informed. The annual defence estimates of time became more fulsome in their explanations of policy.

I do think the early 1980s was a turning point. As the recent rumpus over the failure of a missile test demonstrates, it has yet to be fully appreciated in government that withholding information just because its release would be inconvenient makes things worse over the longer term. The prime exhibit here from the early 1980s– about which I'll say a bit more in a moment – is the sinking of the General Belgrano during the Falklands campaign. The government got itself then into a complete tangle to avoid acknowledging that the Defence Secretary had been inadvertently misleading in his original announcement.

The lesson I learnt from my work on nuclear policy was that any authoritative information which is disclosed without fuss, even if it illuminates a matter of major importance, or even contains the seeds of a great scandal, will generally get minimal media attention compared with almost any other information that has been leaked. This is because of the widespread assumption in the media that the only stuff worth knowing is that which the government doesn't want you to know. The trouble with leaks – which are often a godsend to contemporary historians - is the

information tends to be sensationalised and de-contextualised. I recall the headlines generated by leaks in the New Statesman about the size of the UK nuclear stockpile and the complete inattention when the actual numbers were released as part of the 1998 defence review by a Labour Government - in this matter now acting quite differently from its predecessors.

### III

The great advantage of course of being an Official Historian and a member of an Official Inquiry is that getting hold of information is the least of your worries. The archives are handed to you on a plate - including stuff that will never get to the national archives. You can interview – even interrogate – key players. That is how they lure you in.

The process, however, is not that straightforward.

First, you have to know what to ask for. This may seem a small point but it isn't, because where vital material has been filed away is not always self-evident. Nor has it always been done carefully. This is why it is vital to have a Secretary to an Inquiry who knows the system – in the case of Chilcot, Margaret Aldred. When you are putting together a paper trail it really helps to have somebody around who knows what those paper trails normally contain, and therefore where there are gaps in what has been handed over, or which bit of government would normally be addressing a particular issue. One feature of the Chilcot process was the number of times government departments were asked to have another look, because there was clearly something missing, often leading to that something being found. I should stress that this was not because stuff had been hidden deliberately. You just had to know what to ask for.

Second there are protocols to be respected about the handling of intelligence material, especially if it could reveal too much about methodology, and also about material that if released could cause problems with foreign powers or national security more widely. The challenge comes when these restrictions might lead to misleading impressions or huge gaps in the analysis. The Iraq Inquiry had to push very hard to make sure relevant Cabinet minutes, JIC assessments and – especially – correspondence and conversations between Prime Minister Blair and President Bush were released – although in the latter case the Bush bits had to be left off. The amount released was justified on the basis of the exceptional nature of the Inquiry so that it was not blatantly precedent-setting. The point was that with a topic where there was already so much suspicion of cover-ups and whitewashes the material withheld had to be kept to an absolute and explicable minimum.

Third there is a complex interaction between what is already in the public domain and what one might like to get into the public domain. With the Falklands, for example, nobody seemed to mind very much about what I included from the American side, so you can read verbatim what President Reagan and Secretary of State Haig said to Margaret Thatcher, but I still came up against special rules. One was about neither confirming nor denying the presence of nuclear weapons at sea (though one of the fascinating stories in this case was the nuclear depth charges taken to the South Atlantic). Another was about saying anything about code-breaking, despite the importance of this facility in the Belgrano case. Then there was the recent prohibition against reporting on the activities of Special Forces (whose role had been crucial during the campaign). I was also urged to say nothing about cooperation with Chile.



In all these cases what was in the public domain was helpful. In a negative sense quite misleading claims had been made which only with the right information could be refuted. This was why in the end I managed the first official reference - since the Ultra revelations - to decryption of another country's military communications. More positively, people who knew had already written about these things. Thus Julian Thompson had written about the role of special forces when he was actually in charge of them and Lady Thatcher had spoken about Chile's support when she came to the defence of General Pinochet. Without so much material - not all of it right - out there already I would have had much more trouble getting out a full and adequate account.

Of course the guardians of official secrecy frown on someone who having seen the primary material quote a secondary source, as that gives that source authority. Nonetheless it is a very tempting way round the problem created by restrictions - especially when the secondary source is in the form of a memoir or diary. You may have noticed some examples in Chilcot. Fourth, an official status gives one access to people as well as to documents. A good witness might fill in gaps in the evidence or stop you veering wildly off course or bring home the pressure of events, but memories in the end are fallible and always best checked against the documentary evidence where possible. In the case of Iraq there were hearings. I suspect for many people these were the main thing they wanted from the Inquiry. They wanted to see those responsible asked searching questions in public. This is why incidentally it was never realistic to expect this stage of the Inquiry to be held in private. That is also why the hearings had to be held early. I think they would have been more useful - and made Maxwellisation easier - if they had been later. But in the circumstances that was not an option.

Views differed as to how well we did with our interrogations – many of my learned friends tended to be unimpressed because they saw this as a job for proper lawyers. We took the view, which I am sure was right, that as soon as one lawyer was directly involved with the proceedings they would have been all over the place, as witnesses would have brought their own, advising them to say as little as possible, third parties would have demanded their own representation and so on. By and large, especially with non-politicians, I think the process worked well and I know a number of those involved who found the chance to describe their experiences welcome and therapeutic.

Fifth, there is a duty to be reasonably comprehensive with what one covers. When writing a book for academic or general readers there is always a temptation to leave out or compress the boring stuff. This can create its own problems – the lack of attention to questions of logistics in discussions of conflicts means neglecting the factor that can make or break operations. The core story of the Falklands campaign was about the pressures created by the limited amount of kit with the Task force and the long supply chains. The fact that the problems of asset tracking which had been highlighted in 1991 after Desert Storm were still present in 2003 was important not only in explaining the problems faced then but also as an example of a failure to learn key lessons from the previous campaign. To take another example, the Inquiry's exploration of the duty of care to civilians brings home as much as any other section in the report why it was hard to accomplish much in Iraq as the security situation deteriorated.

Sixth, there is then the question of what one does with the information received. Other than this question of comprehensiveness I approached the

Official History of the Falklands largely as I would have approached any big project. The task imposed a degree of sobriety on the writing. This was not an occasion for polemics or playfulness but the task seemed to me to be one of explaining events as well as I could so there was a good record of what had happened and why. It was still “tip of the iceberg” writing, in that there was likely to be a lot more behind each paragraph than could possibly be included. A few files worth of papers could be condensed into a page of text.

With the Inquiry it was quite different. It soon became evident that the tip of the iceberg would not suffice. The whole iceberg had to be exposed to view. We could not assume that our judgements would be taken on trust. I haven't checked this with my colleagues but I think at first we did hope that we could meet a timetable that now looks a bit absurd by perusing the documents, reflecting on the hearings and then producing a relatively short report. This just couldn't be done. Not only was the chronology quite complicated, but also many different types of issues were raised by events taking place over eight years. Most important was the question of accountability. If we were going to hold people to account then we had to provide the evidence upon which we were basing our judgements. Equally because of the widespread expectations of a whitewash, and the fact that previous inquiries on the intelligence side had not put that issue to rest, the only way we could hope to satisfy our wider audience was by providing as much evidence as possible. One thing that was never a problem with the Iraq Inquiry was the burden of high expectations.

This is why the report was so long and took so long and is written as a chronicle of events with occasional commentary. In some ways this reflected more the approach of my dear colleague the late Sir Martin Gilbert - whose loss was such a heavy blow- than my approach. The Chairman

stressed from early on the importance of a “reliable account” and that is what we strived to produce. In my mind success with the report would come if its contents were generally accepted as being fair, full and reliable, calming rather than re-igniting the controversies. People here may disagree but I believe that is what we achieved.

If we had been confined to the decisions leading up to March 2003 the task would obviously not have taken so long but nor could we have set out the consequences of the decisions, or shown how so much was left unresolved even as hostilities began. This was after all supposed to be a lessons learned inquiry, and many of the lessons were about the aftermath.

#### IV

Lastly, what about the role of holding others to account? This was an unavoidable task of the Inquiry but not of the Official History. In early writing – for example my book on Kennedy – I had expressed anxiety about history as indictment. I was always more interested in working out what happened than passing judgement. But in these cases critical judgements were expected.

With the Falklands the big issue here was the sinking of the *Belgrano*. By the time I was appointed Official Historian I had already sought to debunk the core accusation - that the motives behind the sinking were more political than military, designed not so much to torpedo a ship which posed little threat at the time, but instead to torpedo a new Peruvian-led peace initiative. In a long review in the Times Literary Supplement in March 1984 of one of the main books alleging the conspiracy I challenged the supposition that any Argentine signals would be intercepted and decoded

almost immediately and done so in time to influence Cabinet decisions. Later I was fortunate to work with an Argentina colleague, Virginia Gamba, who had access to Argentine materials. We were able to work out that there was a vital confusion in a statement from the Chief of the Argentine Navy, as the order he thought had been sent as early as 8 pm on 1 May to withdraw was in fact one to initiate offensive operations. The most remarkable thing when I got into the archives was how substantial the post-war files on the Belgrano were compared to those on the actual incident. As with all conspiracy theories one thing led to another: remember missing logs from HMS Conqueror and even the suggestions of a link to the murder of a pensioner, Hilda Morell?

While reviews of the Official History picked up on the fact that there had not been a cover up on the Belgrano they missed noting at least three other areas where I had identified cover-ups. Let me briefly identify them now.

First, the Board of Inquiry into the loss of HMS Sheffield had identified examples not only of bad luck but also of poor practice, yet Admiral Fieldhouse had decided against a court martial on the grounds that it would be to little purpose and anyway we had won the war.

Second, grossly inflated claims had been made about the success of our air defence systems, and in particular Rapier, in taking down Argentine aircraft. This was exposed by Ethell and Price in their book on the air war, where they showed that instead of 14 aircraft being brought down by Rapier, with another six probable, as claimed in the December 1982 Government White Paper on the conflict, the actual number was probably only one. The Select Committee on Defence, which I was still advising, asked for a reconciliation of these numbers as part of an inquiry into weapons performance in the Falklands. As pitches for arms sales had been

made on the basis of these inaccurate figures MoD was reluctant to acknowledge the awkward truth. At first it prevaricated and then when it could no longer do so relied – successfully – on a quiet word with the Committee Chairman to drop the issue.

Third, the Franks Inquiry had allowed itself to be swayed by the intelligence community's own investigation as to when the decision was taken in Buenos Aires to invade the Falklands. By putting this decision at the very latest possible – 31 March 1982 – it encouraged the view that it was in some way a function of domestic unrest in Argentina and certainly too late for it to have been picked up in the UK. The actual day – 26 March – made the decision more comprehensible in terms of the dynamics of the crisis and more regrettable that it had been missed.

All of these three issues were set out in my book yet I do not recall any of them being picked up in the media. I did not make any attempt to draw anyone's attention to them. To some extent I felt that I had done my job by not sustaining the cover-ups. In addition – and this is a big difference with the Iraq Inquiry – I really did not see my job as being one of assigning blame (I did not name any of those responsible on the Sheffield for example). I felt uncomfortable with the idea that I could hand out judgements without any right of reply – there is no Maxwellisation with an Official History.

The lesson I draw from this reinforces the previous one about information that has been extracted from an unwilling government as being far more interesting than that which is disclosed as a matter of course. Having an account of events in the public domain that does raise questions of accountability makes very little difference unless someone is prepared to make a big deal of it. This needs to be kept in mind with regular demands

for transparency and full disclosure – it still requires interpretation and even then what makes the headlines and what is ignored can be remarkably arbitrary.

With the Inquiry, while the Chairman made clear from the start that we were not a court of law and could not rule on any illegality, we were not going to resile from passing judgments on the parts played by individuals. As it would not be right for me now to go into individual cases, I want instead to conclude by reflecting on the problems with acting as a historian when the findings are politically-loaded.

As I do so let me stress once again that I was but one member of the Inquiry panel and these remarks reflects my own views.

V

This lecture should have been entitled “with the benefit of hindsight”. Hindsight captures what is so satisfactory about being a historian but also what seems so unfair to those castigated for past actions which now appear to have been in error.

Senior policy-makers, enveloped by a crisis, can only guess how the events of which they are a part will end. As they try to discern a way forward, they may feel battered, even exhausted, by the rush of events. Messages will be coming in at them from all directions. Particularly hectic moments will find them glancing at bits of paper put in front of them while trying to conduct a conversation on the phone, aware that a colleague is hovering close by desperate to make an important intervention. Some may even be checking a monitor for emails or media reports. Their view will always be partial, even at the very top of government. As they struggle to come to terms with what others want them to know, policy-makers may suspect that there is more interesting material being kept from them. Meanwhile, they rely on

fragmentary intelligence and speculative assessments to tell them what rivals or enemies are up to. This particular crisis may be one of a number so that lots of issues are being decided at once. In those circumstances, policy-makers might argue, the remarkable thing is not that they make mistakes but that they get anything right at all.

When they do get things right, when the story has ended on a positive note, perhaps a great victory achieved, the benefits of hindsight seem slight compared with the wisdom of foresight. So long as individuals are prepared to take credit for the positive then we don't need to let them off the hook when considering the negative. But with both the positive and the negative it is important to recognise the role of luck and chance, and the nature of the uncertainties and risks surrounding any big decisions. Working backward from whatever the outcome produces a different picture than working forward from a broad mass of material, with a lot of background noise, in which one is aware all the time of possibilities still open and choices to be made. This is why the only fair test when evaluating judgments is was a decision reasonable given what was known at the time. That was the test that the Inquiry sought to apply.

The benefits of hindsight are considerable, especially when this is combined with privileged access to archives and to people. This provides a perspective unavailable to those making the actual decisions. It is possible to take a holistic view, to map out what everybody was up to in a way that would have been impossible at the time. Files from across government can be checked and their distribution noted, showing who was in and out of the loop. The key actors can be identified as part of an inner circle which may not always reflect formal titles. These days the historian might be lucky to have access to anything more than a smattering of telephone transcripts and emails - especially now that the potentially incriminating value of



conversational messages has been recognised. But available documents can be read carefully, undoubtedly more so than when they were first circulated, so that subtleties or underlying assumptions can be picked up that might have been missed completely by the original correspondents. The chronology can be established and patterns noted. Most importantly the historian knows how the story, or at least this particular episode, ends. Precisely because of this hindsight can encourage historians to highlight the traces of the decisions to come, which may give them a salience far greater than they had at the time. There is a risk of policy-making appearing too neat and tidy and too compartmentalised, missing what else was going on at the time and how they interacted. Some aspects of policy-making – such as the critical question of who hated whom within government - can be hard to discern. Or the impact of these personal relationships may lack evidence yet provide the simplest explanation of poor communication or coordination. Sometimes historians can impose a pattern on events that only works because so much is ignored or allowed to fade into the background.

This discrepancy between the perspectives of the policy-maker looking forward and the historian looking-back is a good reason for the historian to take care when evaluating policy-makers. This is why many are reluctant to indulge in too much editorialising, as they recognise that they enjoy an unfair advantage. The historian can illuminate the context in which decisions were taken, the factors that were given excessive weight and those too little, report on their effects and note their unintended consequences. But this still needs to be done with a degree of humility as they do this without the burdens of responsibility.

I think the fact that the Inquiry knew that its work would be fully scrutinised helped, and encouraged us to put so much emphasis on the reliable account, so that people could see for themselves the foundations for our judgements and have the material to form judgements of their own. I hope in the end Chilcot helps rather than hinders current and future policy-makers – not by threatening them with being Chilcoted in the future if it all goes wrong but to encourage them to keep asking questions about the course upon which they are set. "Looking back," Robert McNamara wrote in his book *In Retrospect*, "I clearly erred by not forcing . . . a knock-down, drag-out debate over the loose assumptions, unasked questions and thin analyses underlying our military strategy in Vietnam. I had spent 20 years as a manager identifying problems and forcing organizations -- often against their will -- to think deeply and realistically about alternative courses of action and their consequences. I doubt I will ever fully understand why I did not do so here." With the benefit of hindsight it remains a shame that too little of that took place when the vital decisions on Iraq were being taken from early 2002 to March 2003.